

## **STHP: The Proud Princess** by **AgathaOfTheNorth**

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**Summary:** The Stranger Things and Harry Potter AU that nobody asked for... but I'd still write, anyway.

## 1. Rain, Prophecies, and Jane Ives

So... How do I explain this? First of all, I love Harry Potter, and second of all, I am absolutely obsessed with Stranger Things, so basically, the only logical thing to do was to mix them up, right?

Anyway, this story was created after long hours of staring at the ceiling and imagining the ST kids in various settings, until suddenly — bam! I saw them walking around Hogwarts wearing school robes and jinxing James and Troy, and I thought, *I'd pay to see that*. So I wrote that scene, then another one, and another one, and then fuck, I should probably write an entire story now, should I?

Bummer.

So without further ado, here's the HP/ST crossover AU that nobody asked for. (PS. This is fanfiction, so Hawkins, Indiana could be in England. Fight me.)

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, Stranger Things, Star Wars, and Eggos.

### CHAPTER ONE: RAIN, PROPECHIES, AND JANE IVES

June 1982

JIM Hopper was pacing across the living room of his cabin at Hawkins, Indiana, his wet cloak dripping water onto the wooden floorboards, which creaked and bent under his weight. He blew smoke from his long, black pipe, hoping that it would give him some kind of relief, but when his lifelong habit didn't seem to help alleviate the feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach, he threw the thing away and settled at glaring daggers on the lamplight instead.

"Calm down, Jim."

Hopper looked at the woman sitting on the huge armchair in the middle of the room. "Calm down? *You* want *me* to calm down?"

Joyce Byers sighed. Like Hopper, her cloak had been soaked from the

heavy rain, but unlike him, she had sense enough to take it off and drape it over a chair near the fireplace.

She was exhausted; they had just literally come out of a storm, and here he was, walking back and forth across the room with such speed and ferocity that it was making her dizzy. He had been doing it for the last thirty minutes or so, and if he doesn't stop soon, Joyce was fairly certain that she was going to get a headache. Knowing that there was only one way to make him stop, she took her wand out and flicked it — and a silver pocket watch slowly spilled from its tip.

"It's only been an hour since Professor Clarke and the others left," she informed him. Hopper glanced at the pocket watch in her hand; the silver pendant was open, revealing a smooth, glass face. The hands read 9:25 pm. "If things go according to plan, then they should probably be here by midnight."

With the way Hopper had been scowling, she was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to last until midnight. Joyce looked up at the ceiling. She wondered how Will and Jonathan — her boys — were doing. She hoped they were already in bed and weren't staying up late again, huddled on the couch, waiting for her.

"Tsk," Hopper finally said, because apparently, that's all he could think of at the moment.

"Hop," she said softly. "Everything's going to be fine."

He didn't seem to hear her.

"Clarke's a skillful wizard, and so is Callahan and the others. Stop worrying."

"Maybe I should go follow them," he said slowly. He fingered his wand, which was securely tucked under his belt. "Storm's pretty bad. I should go after them just in case —"

"You can't do that." Joyce cut him off.

"Why not?"

"You know why."

Hopper bowed his head. Joyce noticed that his hands had turned into fists, and she hoped that he would listen to her and not do anything reckless — like getting on a broom and going after Clarke and his group in the middle of a goddamn storm. Instead she watched as the retired Auror sighed and finally — *thank Merlin* — took off his cloak, unceremoniously throwing it to the floor to dry or rot or whatever. She wasn't sure.

Hopper sat down on the stool next to the door.

"It's just..." he started to say. He ran a hand through his damp hair. "I can't believe it. You know, that Terry's at St. Mungo's now and that my niece would actually be living with me from now on. A niece, Joyce. A kid. Living *with* me. Could you believe that?"

Joyce gave him a small smile. "What I can't believe is the fact that you didn't even know you had a niece until today."

"Yeah. Well." Hopper said as he leaned forward in his chair. The bloody stool wasn't giving his back any favors. "I lost contact with Terry after she left the family. My sister...well, you know the story. She ran away from home, didn't send us any message for years. I actually thought she'd died or something, and then suddenly — *wham!* I receive news that she was admitted at St. Mungo's, and that my niece is going to be delivered to me at this very moment."

Joyce didn't reply, so Hopper added,

"*Jesus*, I make her sound like she's some sort of express mail or something."

The fire crackled loudly, and Hopper turned his eyes to it, as if he was exoexting Terry's face to suddenly pop out of the flames. A few years after she had left, Hopper checked his fireplace every night, just in case she tried to contact him. He could remember his pain and disappointment after many years of waiting, when he realized that she would never give him, or their parents, a call.

"Joyce," he called out. She nodded her head to him to indicate that she was listening. "What exactly happened?"

She pursed her lips. She knew that he had the right to know, knew that he would be demanding an explanation the moment she pulled him out of the Three Broomsticks and zoomed off into the stormy night in their brooms. She had given him a brief rundown of what had happened, of course — it would be impossible not to — but she still hadn't told him the complete details.

"Like I said earlier, Terry was found at home by her neighbor, who happened to be a wizard, lying on the kitchen floor and unconscious. It hasn't been confirmed yet — we still have to wait for the hospital's report — but we assumed that she was subjected to the Cruciatus curse." She peered at Hopper to see his reaction. When he didn't move, she continued: "Her wand was found, but it was broken in half. Her daughter, Jane, fortunately enough, wasn't home at the time of the attack."

"Awfully convenient, don't you think?" Hopper raised his wand and said, "*Accio!*"

His pipe flew into his outstretched hand.

Joyce narrowed her eyes. "What are you trying to say?"

"The attack happened, at, I don't know, 8 pm? Why would Jane, a ten year old girl, be out of her house at that time?" he twirled the pipe over in his fingers.

"You think Terry sent her away on purpose," Joyce stated.

Hopper shrugged. "Just a thought."

The witch made no comments.

"Say, Joyce..." She turned to him. His voice had suddenly turned dangerously low. "You wouldn't happen to know who did this, would you?"

She looked away. Know? She didn't just know — she had *foreseen* it. She saw the whole thing, for chrissake.

Yes, eleven years ago, when she had been toying with a crystal ball at her Divinity classroom. The glass sphere showed her that *he* was

back, that *he* was out there, that *he* was looking for Terry Ives and her daughter Jane...

Martin Brenner, a wizard who a few years ago had struck terror in the wizarding world, and whom Hopper had also happen to fought on several occasions, was back.

Joyce closed her eyes. Should she tell him?

Hopper was her best friend. She remembered the days when she and him would sneak around the castle, making sure to avoid Peeves, and sit at the grass near the edge of the forbidden forest, watching the stars as they shared the food they stole from the kitchens. They drank their first butterbeers together, were sent to detention after they were caught jinxing the brooms of the Slytherin quidditch team, watched over each other when one was at the infirmary — in short, they were inseparable.

She knew how devastated he was when he found out that his sister had left home. She recalled opening her door one night and seeing him standing there, in the rain, babbling incoherently about his lost sister. She had comforted him. And then, finally Joyce saw her, in a vision, and she didn't tell Hopper, didn't tell her best friend that his sister was alive and was probably in grave danger.

Joyce wondered whether things would have been better if she had told Hopper what she saw in the crystal ball that night. Maybe they could have saved Terry from Brenner and his allies, and poor little Jane wouldn't be an orphan. Still, she knew why she hadn't told him in the first place; a prophecy was not something to be meddled with.

There was only one person she had told about it: the Hogwarts Headmaster, Professor Owens. He was on the agreement that the prophecy shall be left untouched, and for that to happen, they had to withhold information from Hopper.

"I'm sorry, Hop," she told him, and she felt like the words were not enough to convey the extent of her apology. "I don't know who did this."

He was silent for a few seconds, then with a sigh, he said, "I see."

"That is exactly why we need Jane to be transferred here," she said, and her voice was now loud and clear. "We need to secure a place for her to stay in, somewhere unknown. We also need someone to protect her, and as her uncle and Auror, you'd do well on the job."

"Uh-huh," said Hopper, unconvinced.

"That is also why you can't come to retrieve her tonight," Joyce went on. "The men who did this could still be there, spying, and they might recognize you."

"I'm that famous, huh."

"Half of Azkaban is filled because of you."

"You give me too much credit."

Joyce raised her eyebrows. "Maybe I am. Considering you were such a lazy ass back in the day, I'm surprised you managed to capture a *lot* of dark wizards."

He shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm a natural, I guess."

She could feel the atmosphere lightening with his mood, so she continued: "Naturally stubborn, you mean."

"Yeah, yeah. Same difference. You do know those dark wizards are a pain, right? They're nothing if not persistent. I had to take several curses before I could lock them up in Azkaban."

"You were a nice looking hamster, though."

"That wasn't the work of a dark wizard; that was Callahan's wand going wild."

They both laughed. Hopper put his pipe between his lips, about to inhale a healthy amount of smoke, when a series of loud knocks suddenly reverberated around the cabin, startling him and Joyce.

Joyce narrowed her eyes at the source of the sound. Hopper stood up from his seat and quietly made his way over to her. She glanced at her pocket watch: 11:00. They stood side-by-side, and silently, with

no words exchanged, raised their wands towards the front door.

"Hello?"

"What's the password?" asked Joyce seriously.

"Tweedledums!"

They both gave a sigh of relief. They eyed the door, waiting for Professor Clarke to enter. They both trusted him, but nevertheless Hopper kept his wand up, because if there was anything he learned from being an Auror, it was to never let your guard down.

The door opened, and Professor Clarke walked in. He was dripping wet; his black cloak clung to his body, and his moustache stuck to his upper lip at odd angles. His goggles dangled on one ear and a few leaves had stuck to his hair. He looked tired and cold, but otherwise, he was unharmed.

He was even smiling slightly.

"Professor Joyce, Mr. Hopper," he nodded to them. He picked a tiny twig off his hair. "I already sent Callahan and the others to St. Mungo's to get a follow up on Terry's condition."

"Oh," said Joyce. "Good."

"So I gather everything went smoothly?" asked Hopper.

The professor bobbed his head. "Yes. The house was a mess, so we had to fix it before the Muggle police could come. We also had to obliviate some Muggles who witnessed what had happened, but other than that, everything went according to plan."

Hopper grunted in approval. "So, where is she?"

Professor Clarke beamed. "Joyce, Hopper — I'd like you to meet Jane Ives."

From behind him peered a girl with wide, brown eyes. She shifted her gaze between Hopper and Joyce, studying them warily, and when Professor Clarke gave her a nudge, she took a tentative step forward.



Hopper finally had a good look at his long lost niece.

Jane had curly brown hair that went just past her ears, high cheekbones, and an upturned nose that clearly resembled Terry's. She wore an oversized cloak over a white shirt and overalls, and she was pale as a sheet. She looked terrified, confused, and curious at the same time. Jane looked so small in her large clothing that for some unknown reason, Hopper had the urge to hug her.

He didn't, though.

"Hey kid," he said, trying to be gentle as possible. Merlin knows what she had gone through. "I'm Jim. I'm your uncle. So, um..." he turned to Joyce, who gave him an encouraging smile, "You'd be living with me from now on. Is that okay with you?"

Jane nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Clarke said you'd take care of me until Mama's okay."

Hopper felt a lump in his throat. "Yes, that's right. I'll take care of you while we wait for Terry, your mom, to recover."

"When is that?" she asked quietly.

Hopper glanced at Joyce and Professor Clarke before answering: "Soon."

She seemed to be struggling to say something, because she squirmed on her spot and bit her lip. Hopper hoped that she wasn't suddenly going to cry; he was pretty *sure* that he'd panic if she did. But all Jane did was slump her shoulders and look up at him, almost like she was giving up.

"Do you have any eggos?"

Joyce smiled at her. "Of course. Do you want some, dear? Are you hungry?"

She nodded wordlessly, and Joyce lead her to the kitchen, leaving

Hopper and Professor Clarke standing alone in the living room. The professor pointed his wand at his face — a funnel of wind shot off of it, plastering his damp hair and moustache to his skin. Bad idea. He quickly put it down.

"Thank you," Hopper told him sincerely.

He smiled. "No big deal. It wasn't really that difficult," he glanced at his wristwatch. "I have to go. Please take care of her."

Hopper followed him to the door. He stepped over the threshold, and turning to go, he said, "I can't wait to have her in my class next year. I'm sure Jane would be thrilled to go there, and I'll make sure she feels welcomed at Hogwarts."

"Thank you," repeated Hopper. Although knowing that she grew up in the Muggle world, Hopper would have to do a fair amount of explaining before Jane could attend the wizarding school. "I bet she'll love it there."

"Goodnight, Hopper." A swish of a cloak, and Professor Clarke was gone.

Hopper raised his eyes to the night sky. The rain has stopped. Thoughts swirled in his mind, mixing and overlapping so fast that he was having a hard time sorting them all out. *Who attacked Terry? Why did those people want her?* And more importantly, *Why are they after Jane?*

He could hear voices drifting from the kitchen, where he knew Joyce was whipping up some kind of food to comfort the kid, and he fingered his wand, as if anticipating an attack.

*What the hell was he supposed to do now?*

He closed his eyes. He did not have answers to any of his questions.

At least not yet, anyway.

## 2. Eleven, Eleven

And I'm back. You'll notice that this chapter is way longer than the first, and I intended for it to be that way. The chapters after this would also be as long as this one, if not longer, since we are now entering the story proper.

Anyway, I wanted to put something out of the way first. So I debated whether or not I would let the kids cuss in this story (the world of HP rarely let its characters swear), and finally I decided that I'd let them. As strange as this may sound, *swearing* is part of their characterization, so taking it away would just be weird.

Besides, they swear all the time in the show, so yeah.

**Disclaimer:** I do not own Harry Potter, Stranger Things, Eggos, and Dungeons and Dragons.

### CHAPTER TWO: ELEVEN, ELEVEN

August 1983

MICHAEL Wheeler's uneventful summer ended when a large barn owl swooped in through the open window of the Wheeler's kitchen, startling the family, who was eating breakfast at their pristine oak table. It was a dull Sunday morning on Maple Street, where their suburban home stood at the end of the cul-de-sac, and Mike, the Wheeler's only son and second child, sat at the kitchen table with a bored expression. However, he suddenly sat up when the owl appeared, hoping that it carried a letter from his best friend, Lucas, who told him that he had purchased a new broom (*The Cleansweep, Mike*, he had written, *is the best broom you'd ever see!*; to which Mike replied, *You know I suck at Quidditch*), this month and was sending him loads of letters about his progress on the Cleansweep.

This summer felt longer than the other ones. Mike missed his childhood friends Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, and Will Byers, but they were all gone this summer, with Dustin going on vacation to Albania with his mom and Will staying at Hogwarts with his family

(his mother, Mrs. Byers, taught Divinity there); and even Lucas, who lived near him, was away at the moment, due to his father being assigned to Romania for two months. Mike knew it had something to do with Mr. Sinclair's Auror duties—Lucas wouldn't shut up about all the Dark Wizards his father had to deal with on his letters.

Mike set his gaze on his father, who sat at the head of the table. Ted Wheeler was a plain man with plain features. He wore a cream colored shirt, a blue necktie, and deep purple robes. He worked for the Ministry of Magic as the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, which sounded cool to Mike when he first heard it. Well that was until his dad brought him to work when he was seven and made him sit on a huge armchair in his office all day. He wondered then why his father thought it was fun sitting all day, but now he realized why his dad was perfect for the job: all he had to do was sit behind a desk, sign long rolls of parchment, and deliver owls to his subordinates when he needed help. Mike guessed it wasn't so bad. After all, he was paid loads of golden Galleons for it.

Mike eyed him again. Mr. Wheeler's food was gone, but he didn't leave the kitchen yet. In fact, his head drooped, and that's when Mike—who wasn't really thinking—pounded his fist on the table with a loud *bang!* He woke up with a start and accidentally made the fruit basket dance across the surface of the table, much to little Holly's enjoyment. The youngest member of the Wheeler family jumped up on her high chair and tried to reach for the dancing basket, but with a flick of her wand, Mrs. Wheeler had already undone the enchantment and sent Holly sitting back to her chair. Mr. Wheeler gave her an apologetic look.

"Mike, what was that for?" his mother asked him.

"Nothing," he said quietly. "Spasm."

*This is the most entertainment I had all summer,* thought Mike. He stabbed his fork on the scrambled eggs. His older sister, Nancy, shook her head at his behavior.

He watched as the owl flew over Mr. Wheeler and dropped a rolled copy of the *Daily Prophet* onto his lap, and Mike slumped back to his seat in disappointment. The bird perched itself on his shoulder and

extended a leg, where a small pouch had been tied. Mr. Wheeler picked up his newspaper and did not even blink as Mrs. Wheeler quickly rounded the kitchen counter and put some coins into the waiting owl's pouch. Finally, it ruffled its feathers and flew away; and before Mrs. Wheeler could go back to her cooking, another owl—this one snowy white and smaller—came in, carrying what appeared to be two, square envelopes.

Mrs. Wheeler sighed, but before she could take the letters away from the owl, Mike had already grabbed them, hastily sitting down on his chair as he prepared to rip open the first one.

"Mike," said Nancy suddenly. "Don't tear the envelope."

Mike threw her a dirty look. "Why? It's *my* letter, isn't it? Lucas wouldn't mind—"

"Dummy," she cut him off. "Look at it—it's got a seal. It's from Hogwarts." Seeing his confused face, she added, "Seriously, Mike. Your friend's Mum teaches there, surely you knew that this year would be your first in the school, right? Now give me my letter—"

She snatched the envelope from Mike's hand quite easily, because he was too busy gaping to put up a fight (which, normally, he would do), and carefully slid the usual two pieces of parchment from the inside. However, several more things fell from the envelope—it was a shiny badge with a huge letter *P* written at the center. Nancy beamed at her mom and said in an excited voice, "I'm appointed as Prefect!"

Mike knew what a Prefect was, because his father was a Hufflepuff Prefect back in the day, and so was his mother in Ravenclaw. He knew that it was tough and boring work.

"Oh sweetie," gushed Mrs. Wheeler. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, Mom. Say, can I buy new robes, then? My old ones are getting short."

"Of course, of course. We'll get you the best ones! Another Prefect in the family—how wonderful!"

While Karen Wheeler congratulated her daughter for this apparently

groundbreaking award, and their father gave a flat, "That's very nice, dear," without looking up from his paper, Mike scanned his letter slowly. He wanted to smack himself—how could he forget about Hogwarts?

It was all he and his friends could talk about after they had celebrated each other's eleventh birthdays this year, and Will had just informed him about his mother's lessons last week. Also, living in a family of wizards assured him that he would know all about the famous magical school. Hell, he even watched as their parents sent Nancy off on the Hogwarts express five years ago. He read the letter again, a grin spreading across his face as he realized that his other friends must have received their letters just now. Ignoring Nancy's smug look—what's so good about being a Prefect, anyway?—he went back to his plate.

He had to write to them, he thought excitedly as he stuffed the parchments back into the envelope and put it inside his jean pocket. Mike's right leg bounced excitedly, prompting his knee to knock the kitchen table several times, and he wolfed down his breakfast of bacons and eggs with such speed that he had choked at least three times in the last twenty minutes. Nancy, who had already put away her letter and Prefect badge, cast him a sideways glance as he reached for his glass of pumpkin juice; he downed the whole glass in one go, and some of the orange liquid trickled down the side of his mouth and dropped onto his empty plate. He wiped the side of his mouth with the back of his hand.

Nancy wrinkled her nose. "You're disgusting, Mike."

Mike, whose cheeks were still bulging from all the food he was currently chewing, replied, "*You're* disgusting."

"What?" she asked, confused. She gestured to her perfectly clean plate. "I don't think I understand what you're saying, Mike."

"Uh-huh," he replied. He had finally swallowed his food, and he took another drink of pumpkin juice before answering her. "You excited for school, Nance?"

She raised her eyebrow at his sudden change of topic. "Yes, I am."

"I see. So that's why you let Steve sneak around the house all summer, because you just *can't wait* for school to start and see him."

"What?"

"Who's Steve?"

Nancy whirled around. Their father had asked the question. He didn't look suspicious or angry—just curious. The *Daily Prophet* was neatly tucked between his armpit. His eyebrow was raised as he waited for Nancy to answer.

"He's a friend," she said finally. "From school."

Mike snorted. "Yeah right."

Mr. Wheeler shrugged and dropped the subject. His wife, however, stood up and put her hands to her hips. Apparently, Nancy being appointed as Prefect flew out of her mind the moment she heard Mike's revelation about Steve.

"A friend?" she asked. She pointed her wand at Holly's dirty clothes and said, "*Evanesco!*" The stains vanished, revealing a clean blue shirt. "And why is he sneaking around the house, Nancy?"

"He isn't 'sneaking'," she said, and she was trying hard not to roll her eyes, Mike could tell. "Mike's just saying that because he wants me to get in trouble."

"Liar. Who's that I saw climbing through your window three nights ago?" countered Mike.

"He wasn't climbing—"

"Oh yeah, he had a broom—"

"I'll jinx you, I swear—"

"All right, that's enough," said Mrs. Wheeler loudly. She waved her wand, and the plates stacked themselves and flew over to the sink. "Now clear out. I don't want to see any jinxes flying around here."

"I don't even have a wand yet," reasoned Mike. Then he remembered something. "I'll have my wand soon enough. Watch out, Nancy, I'll—" seeing his mother's warning glare, he quickly scrambled up the stairs and shouted, "Are we going to buy my things tomorrow?"

"No," his mother shouted back, "You still have a month before school starts, Michael. We'll go to Diagon Alley two weeks from now, all right?"

Groaning, he stomped up to his room and closed the door before Nancy could barge in and make true on her threat. Despite what Nancy had said, Mike was far from disgusting. His room was clean and organized: his blue bedspread was smooth and fixed; the posters of the greatest wizards in the world was pinned to his walls evenly; the books on his shelf was arranged alphabetically; his collection of trading cards from all the chocolate frogs he'd eaten was stashed away in the drawer of his desk, safe and piled inside a wooden rectangular box; and his owl, Han, was tucked away inside his cage.

Wondering what jinx he would use on his sister when he got his wand, Mike sat on the floor, his back to the bed, and unfolded the letter again:

## **HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY**

**Headmaster: Sam Owens**

**(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)**

**Dear Mr. Michael Wheeler,**

**We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.**

**Students shall be required to report to the Chamber of Reception upon arrival, the dates of which shall be fully advised.**

**Please ensure that the utmost attention be made to the list of requirements attached herewith.**

**We very much look forward to receiving you as part of the new**



generation of Hogwarts' heritage.

Yours Sincerely,

*Scott Clarke*

Scott Clarke

Deputy Headmaster

Mike put the parchment away and read the second one:

**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry**

**UNIFORM**

**First-year students will require:**

- 1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)**
- 2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear**
- 3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)**
- 4. One winter cloak (black, with silver fastenings)**

**Please note that all pupils' clothes shall carry name tags**

**COURSE BOOKS**

**All students should have a copy of each of the following:**

**The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk**

***A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot**

***Magical Theory* by Adalbert Waffling**

***A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch**

***One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore**

***Magical Drafts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger**

*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander

*The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* by Quentin Trimble

#### **OTHER EQUIPMENT**

**1 wand**

**1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)**

**1 set glass or crystal phials**

**1 telescope**

**1 set brass scales**

**Students may also bring, if they desire, an owl OR a cat OR a toad.**

**PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICK**

**Yours sincerely,**

***Lucinda Thomsicle-Pocus***

**Lucinda Thomsicle-Pocus**

#### **Chief Attendant of Witchcraft Provisions**

Mike smiled. He was pretty sure that Lucas would have a fit over first years not being allowed their own broomsticks. He knew that he had been itching to show-off his Cleansweep to all of them ever since he had bought it, and he had told Mike several times that he was definitely going to get a spot on his House team.

*House...* Mike stared at the logo printed on top of the letter; a large *H* was surrounded by a lion, a snake, an eagle and a badger. Mike knew what those animals represented—it was Hogwarts' four great Houses Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, named after the school's four founders. Back when Nancy started her first term, Mike had read some books about Hogwarts because he wanted so badly to

know what it was like.

He remembered wanting to be in Gryffindor, the House that Godric Gryffindor had established, but he knew that the students who were sorted there were all brave and chivalrous and basically heroic, things that were, unfortunately enough, not on Mike's skill set. He supposed that Hufflepuff wasn't so bad, since his dad was once one of them, but imagine if they put him in Slytherin—he doubted his thin arms and knobbly knees would do much against the bullies that was sure to come. That house had produced more dark wizards than any other house, after all. And as for Ravenclaw...well, Mike honestly preferred not being stuck with Nancy at school.

Mike raised his head to the ceiling. Lost in thought, Mike did not even notice as Dustin's owl, Dart, swept into his room and dropped a letter to his face. The edge of the envelope poked his eye and made him yelp; he quickly stood up and shooed the owl out, but Dart remained perched on Han's cage, waiting for a treat and a reply. Mike, rubbing his eye, gave him some food grudgingly.

When his eye had finally stopped tearing up, he sat down on his desk and read Dustin's letter:

*Dear Mike,*

*HOLY SHIT. I have just received my Hogwarts letter, and it is awesome. If you're wondering why I have sent a letter so quickly, it's because I have already returned from vacation a day ago—I know, I know. Sorry I didn't tell you right away—and am already bored out of my mind. Mum brought a cat from Albania that she names Scuffles, and now we have, like, ten freaking balls of fur here. Their fucking mewling is driving me crazy.*

*So what do you think? I wonder which house I'll be in. I hope I don't end up in Hufflepuff—no offense to your dad, Mike—because I heard they all die as virgins. That would suck. I mean, I guess that isn't true, considering YOU are alive, but still. I think maybe I'll be put in Ravenclaw, and then I can finally woo Nancy (again, no offense to you, Mike).*

*I can't wait. I think I'll bring that exploding pen I brought as a souvenir last week and spill ink all over Lucas's first assignment.*

Mike laughed, imagining Dustin handing Lucas a pen only for it to explode right in his face and the fight that was sure to follow. He also wondered whether it would be a good idea to tell Dustin that Nancy was probably dating Steve now, but decided against it because for some reason, his friend had a major crush on his sister. It would break his heart.

*Speaking of Lucas, he'd probably be pissed that he can't bring his precious Cleansweep with him. And that's a good thing, too. I don't think I could stand him babbling about his broomstick all year (which I think, with broomstick or not, he would still do). Will said that according to his mother, first years were not allowed to join the house teams, but he was too kind to point that out to Lucas. You know Will—he's soft as a feather.*

He couldn't help but agree to that; out of all his friends, Will Byers was perhaps the most gentle and kind.

*Anyway, I was kinda hoping that we could all meet at Diagon Alley next week to buy our stuff. It would be great if we could also check out the new shop near Florean Fortescue's; they say it sells all the cool trading cards, board games, and toys in town. We could get a new D D set. I'll wait for your reply, and if you're good, then I'll write to Lucas and Will.*

*With love and all that shit,*

*Dustin*

Putting the letter down, Mike opened his bedroom door and shouted down the stairs, "MOM!"

"What is it, Mike? And why are you yelling?"

"COULD WE GO TO DIAGON ALLEY NEXT WEEK?"

"What? I told you, we'd go there—"

"DUSTIN AND THE OTHERS WOULD BE COMING THERE NEXT WEEK! WE COULD BUY ALL OF OUR STUF TOGETHER!"

"Michael—"

"PLEASE, MOM, PLEASE? LUCAS AND DUSTIN JUST GOT BACK. I

HAVE TO SEE THEM."

His mother's voice floated up the stairs. "All right. Now will you please stop shouting? You're father's resting."

Not bothering to answer, he ran back to his desk and scribbled a sloppily written reply:

*Dear Dustin,*

*Sure. We could go next week. I'd be with Mum, Nancy, and probably Holly. Did you know Nancy was appointed as Prefect? My mom's so thrilled about it that she might just buy Nancy anything she wants. It sucks, really. I don't have a badge to ask my mum for a new set of Wizard's Chess, and even though I know that we're just first years, I don't want to be Prefect anyway.*

*You're absolutely right about Lucas. Although knowing how reasonable and a stuck up for rules he is, I doubt he'd protest that much about the whole broomstick thing.*

*I don't want to be in Hufflepuff either, so don't worry about it. And as for Ravenclaw, I don't want to be with Nancy (and watch you all year trying to win her over). I'd seen enough of her to last a lifetime. But I am excited about our lessons. I looked through our course books, and they all seem very interesting! I can't wait to read them. And yeah, we should totally see the new shop you're talking about. My D D board is getting old.*

*See you next week!*

*Mike*

Mike rolled the parchment tightly and tied it with a thin cord. Beckoning Dart over, he secured his reply to the owl's outstretched leg, and giving him one last treat, let him fly off into the mid-afternoon sky. He picked up Dustin and Hogwart's letters, and putting them on his nightstand, proceeded to take out his copy of Tales of Beetle the Bard and continuing where he left off.

THE week passed by on a sluggish pace, but finally it was Sunday again, and Mike could barely contain his excitement. He stood in front of the fireplace with Nancy as their mother tucked the back of

Holly's shirt back inside her jumper. Mike tapped his foot impatiently, earning him a glare from Nancy, but he paid her no mind. They hadn't antagonized each other these past few days, and they wanted to keep it that way; both knew that they should be in their mother's good graces if they wanted her to agree on their requests.

As Mrs. Wheeler straightened up, carrying a smiling Holly in her arms, Nancy nudged Mike's arm roughly. Mike started to protest, but she jutted her chin to their mum's direction and raised her eyebrows, as if Mike had forgotten all about their deal the previous night.

Shooting his sister a dirty look, he spoke: "So, um, Mom, Nancy and I were thinking, what if you let us buy our stuff ourselves? I mean, you could go and shop for the house and Holly, and me and Nancy can—"

"What's going on here?" she asked curiously. It was rare for Mike and Nancy to do anything together nowadays.

"We just thought that it would be easier if you just gave us money and let us buy our things together than come with us and carry Holly all day," explained Nancy in her good-and-sweet-daughter voice. "I heard you wanted to pick out new dress robes for your dinner this week, so we thought that you could use the opportunity to visit the best shops in Diagon Alley."

She eyed them suspiciously. "Are you two up to something?"

"No!" they both said quickly.

"Hmm," she said, unconvinced. "Are you sure you're going to be alright?"

"Yes!" said Mike, nodding his head vigorously.

"Absolutely," agreed Nancy.

"I do need new dress robes, and your father probably won't bother to get his, either," she considered. She sighed and looked at Nancy. "Okay, you two can go on ahead—" she turned to Mike, "but I don't want to hear you causing any trouble to your sister. Do you understand that, Michael?"

Mike wanted to roll his eyes, but for once he was grateful for their mother's complete trust on Nancy. "Yeah."

"Stick to Nancy," she continued. "I don't want you wandering Diagon Alley alone. You're still not allowed to do magic, and so is your sister, actually—wait, aren't you supposed to meet with your friends?"

Mike ran a hand through his messy hair. "Yes. I'm meeting the guys later. You know, *after* Nancy and I buy our things. She agreed to watch over us."

"Is that so?" said Mrs. Wheeler to her daughter. "That's very nice of you, honey."

Nancy smiled. Mrs. Wheeler took the jar of Floo powder from the top of the fireplace and offered it to Nancy. "You first."

Nancy threw the powder to the fire—the flames turned green and rose higher—she stepped through the fireplace—Nancy clearly stated, "Diagon Alley"—and a moment later, she was gone. Mike bit his lip. He *hated* traveling by Floo powder. With a nod from his mom, Mike took a handful of powder and scattered it in the flames where Nancy had just been a few seconds ago. He felt a rush of warm wind hit him as he stood on the fire, and praying that it won't make him sick, he shouted: "Diagon Alley!"

It felt like someone had tugged on an imaginary rope tied to his waist. Mike felt himself spiraling down an endless void, with hundreds of fireplaces floating around him, and he kept his arms close to his body, afraid that he might accidentally hit something. His insides were churning; he was sure that he was about to puke. He closed his eyes and was just about sure that his breakfast was going up when he landed face first onto sleek, wooden floorboards.

"Ugh," he mumbled. He felt sick—and stupid. He was spread out on the floor like a total loser. He raised his head, expecting to see Nancy laughing at his pathetic display, but all he saw was a young girl staring at him with wide, brown eyes.

*Well shit. Looked like someone witnessed my epic blunder.*

"Are you okay?" the girl asked in a soft voice.

A hand came into Mike's view, and he took it. Mike mumbled an incoherent thanks, scrambled back to his feet, and immediately wished that he had kept his face shoved onto the floor.

The girl was perhaps the same age as him, with shoulder-length brown hair that curled at the ends and a small, button nose. Her cheeks were rosy, as if she was permanently embarrassed, and her mouth was turned down in concern. She wore a white turtleneck sweater and overalls, white chucks, and a few silver hairclips. She held a thick book in her hand, and hanging from her pale neck was a golden necklace with a—wait, was that an *eggo*? Mike was confused. And dumbfounded. People often called his sister beautiful, but they obviously hadn't met this girl yet.

Mike was just about to take a closer look at her pendant when she repeated, "Are you okay?"

"Pretty," he blurted out before he can stop himself. Whether he was referring to her face or her necklace, he had no idea.

She hugged her book close to her chest to block the necklace from view, and a lock of brown hair escaped from her clip and fell down her nose.

Scratch that—Mike was *definitely* referring to her face.

"Oh! Yeah—yeah, I'm fine. J-just a sec—" he stuttered. He was just about to ask her name when a voice suddenly said behind him, "Michael, you're blocking the way."

Mike turned around and saw his mum emerging from the fireplace. Holly was laughing as she pointed at Mike's lower lip, which, he now realized, was bleeding. He must have bitten it when he fell. *I'm such a wastoid*, he thought. Remembering the girl who had helped him, he spun, but was disappointed when he didn't find her there. He stood on tiptoes, hoping to see her among the people bustling about in the shop, but she was gone.

"Mum! Mike!" Nancy's head popped up at the end of the aisle. She



walked over to them, a rusty cauldron in hand, and said, "We're at Flourish and Blotts, so I guess we should buy our books first."

Mrs. Wheeler nodded. "All right. I'll leave you two here. Meet me at Ollivanders by noon. I want to be there when Mike buys his wand."

Seeing no problem with that, Mike said, "That's okay."

After handing the money over to Nancy, she disappeared into the crowd of people and left with the soft tinkling of the shop bell. Nancy beckoned Mike over to the shop's window, where five-foot stack of *A History of Magic* was displayed. Without even looking at it, she took the one on top and placed it in their cauldron. Their shopping went by rather quickly; Nancy had her list memorized, as did Mike, and soon enough they were exiting Flourish and Blotts and was making their way over to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occassions.

"Say," said Mike carefully as they neared the shop where they were getting their new school robes. "You wouldn't happen to see a brown haired girl back in the shop, have you?"

Nancy didn't look at him. "There were a lot of people there, Mike. And a *lot* of girls with brown hair."

"Right." He muttered, regretting that he had asked.

"Although," —Mike leaned closer to her— "there was a girl who came out of the aisle you and mum were in. She had brown hair, I think."

"Oh," said Mike, trying not to sound too excited. "I see."

Nancy opened the door to the shop and said teasingly, "Am I detecting a crush here?"

"What? No!" he said loudly. He stuck his tongue out. "It's just—she helped me, you know. I wasn't able to thank her, that's all."

Mike spent the rest of the morning fitting robes, choosing school tools (he begged Nancy to buy him a golden telescope, but she wouldn't budge), and trying not to gag at the smell in Slug and Jiggers Apothecary ("I will never get used to this," said Nancy, scowling). At last, they had all they needed; Nancy bought an enchanted bag from

one of the shops even though it wasn't on their list, and before Mike could tell her that their mom would be furious, she quickly explained to him that she wasn't planning on lugging around their heavy stuff all day. Mike supposed this made sense—he didn't want his hands full either. Trusting Nancy, he nodded and spilled his things inside the tiny handbag.

"Here," said Nancy. She shoved a few galleons and several silver sickles into Mike's hand. "Just as we agreed on."

Mike counted the money. "And mum wouldn't notice the missing money?"

"That's not mum's, Mike," she said, sighing. "That's my savings. Anyway, we still have two hours before mum expects us at Ollivanders. Remember: we were together all morning. We'll meet here later and go to the shop together. I won't tell her that you bought a new D D game, and you'll keep your mouth shut about me going to the Three Broomsticks. Do you get that?"

"Yes," he replied. And although he actually liked Nancy's company today and was grateful that she helped him in his plan, he still can't help himself. "Say hello to Steve Harrington for me."

She snorted. With one last wave, she trudged down the path leading to the Three Broomsticks, and Mike watched her figure confidently weaving through the bustling streets with mild amusement. He supposed Nancy was all right; they were close when they were younger, and there were times like these when she seemed almost cool. When she was finally out of sight, he turned around and made his way to the opposite direction, his pockets jiggling with coins. Not knowing where his friends were, he wandered over from shop to shop, studying the displays—hundreds of glassy, unblinking eyes stared at him at Eeylops Owl Emporium, a witch almost knocked him over as she hurried down the steps of Gringotts, and he brought a chocolate sundae at Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlor.

Exhausted and figuring that his friends would probably go here sooner or later (Dustin was a sucker for ice cream. Or any food, actually), he sat at an empty table outside the shop. The mid-morning sun was high in the sky, making everything look shiny. The signs

hanging off the shop windows glinted bronze and silver, and dozens of witches and wizards hurried around the streets, wearing robes and hats with colors that ranged from bright pink to puss green. The sight made Mike giddy with joy. *This* was what the wizarding world was really like, all busy and chaotic and full of magic.

Mike was swirling his spoon around the cup of frozen vanilla and chocolate syrup when he saw her: the brown haired girl back at Flourish and Blotts was sitting alone in a booth near the window of the ice cream parlor, eating what appeared to be a scoop of strawberry ice cream. Unlike him, she wasn't looking at her surroundings, but was instead looking down on a book that was open on her lap. She was so engrossed on the pages before her that the strawberry ice cream was slowly melting on her plate. Just to make sure that it was her, Mike squinted his eyes and caught sight of her necklace. Yup—that was definitely the strange golden egg, all right.

Mike gulped. There she was, the pretty girl that had helped him in the shop, apparently alone. Gathering his courage and his sundae, he stood up and made his way over to where she was, praying that if she was here with someone, that they weren't planning to show up anytime soon.

"Hey," he greeted when he was close enough for her to hear.

She started, and the book she had been reading slid down her lap and fell onto the pavement with a soft thud.

"Sorry," said Mike. He picked up the book and held it out to her. "I didn't mean to scare you."

The girl shook her head, and realizing who he was, smiled—a small, tentative smile, with her lips pressed together and the corners of her mouth lifting just slightly. Mike returned it, the book and the smile, and hoping that it wouldn't look too presumptuous of him, he took the seat across from her. She didn't seem to mind; she dusted the surface of the book and stuffed it back inside her messenger bag, still smiling.

"So," he began. *Think, Mike, think.* "What's up?"

Not for the first time, Mike wanted to smack himself.

She shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. I'm eating ice cream."

"I can see that."

"Oh. Um. Well—"

He wanted to groan. This was not how he had expected this conversation to go.

"You like strawberry?" he asked, trying again.

"Yes." As if to prove her point, she took a bite and smiled, more widely this time.

"Cool," he said feebly. "Yeah, that's cool."

"Ice creams are cool."

"Yeah. I know, right? They're the best."

Sitting there was a bad idea.

To his surprise, the girl shook her head. "No."

"Huh?" he asked, startled.

"Ice creams are not the best," she said gently. "Eggos are."

Mike laughed softly. "Eggos are good, too, I guess." He pointed at her necklace. "Is that why you have an eggo as a pendant?"

She touched the golden eggo and studied it. Her cheeks turned pink. "Yes."

"Oh," he replied, beaming. "I think it looks great. Unique."

"Unique," she repeated in that quiet voice of hers.

"Um. Anyway, I went here because I wanted to say thank you. You know, for helping me at the shop earlier." Mike scratched the back of his head as he scanned the area for anyone who might be walking

over to their table. If she was shopping with her parents, then Mike seriously did not want them to get the wrong idea.

She blinked. "It's no big deal. I didn't do anything."

"No! It is a big deal. To me, I mean. Really, thank you. What I'm trying to say is—" Mike stared at his sundae as if it held all the answers in life.

"That I'm...pretty?" she said helpfully. She had apparently remembered what he said back then.

"Yes! I mean, no! I was referring to your necklace back then—yeah, yeah, that's it—I'm not talking about you at all—I mean, not that you aren't pretty—you are, believe me—you're *really* pretty—shit, I shouldn't have said that—"

She continued to gaze at him, her face looking more and more confused with every word he said. Mike wished that his friends would just come already so that they could save him from his self-mortification (although in hindsight, they might just embarrass him further), but no such luck. Trying to calm himself down and realizing that he had been waving his cup the whole time he was talking—chocolate syrup dotted the front of his sweater—Mike lowered his head and finally muttered, "What I meant was, thank you for not laughing at me and helping me up."

He picked at a loose thread on his sleeve. He realized just now how lame he had sounded. He opened his mouth, about to pipe up an excuse and leave, when a hand suddenly appeared before his eyes. He looked up and saw the girl smiling at him, her hand outstretched and waiting. He had an immense feeling of *déjà vu*.

"I'm Jane," she said softly. "Jane Hopper."

Mike gingerly took her hand. "Michael Wheeler." Shaking her hand twice, he added, "But my friends call me Mike."

"A nickname," she stated wistfully.

"Yeah. A nickname," he said happily. "Don't you have one?"

She tilted her head. "No."

"Well I guess it's hard to pick a nickname for Jane, huh? It's too short. Maybe we could make you one."

"Make one?"

"Yeah. Like, we'll give you a nickname. Something unique, like your necklace."

"I'd like that," she replied, nodding.

Encouraged, Mike plowed on. "My friends—Lucas, Dustin and Will—they could help give you a nickname."

"Friends," she said carefully. Her brown eyes turned downcast. "It's nice to have friends, isn't it?"

"Friends are awesome," he said. "How about you? Do you have any friends?"

Jane shook her head sadly. "No."

"What? That's crazy!" exclaimed Mike. "Know what, you and I could be friends. Then I can introduce you to the others, and they'll be your friends too."

"Really?"

"Promise. And I'll get you a nickname."

"Hmm..." she said, looking around the ice cream parlor as if it had a list of nicknames she could choose from. She suddenly sat up straight. "I have to go."

"What?" said Mike. He was still reeling from their conversation.

Jane stood up and pointed at the clock hanging just above the counter. "It's eleven o' clock. I have to meet my dad and go home."

"Eleven o' clock? What—"

"It's nice to meet you, Mike," she said hastily. "I have to go now."

"Really?" he asked incredulously. He eyed the clock, which read 11:10. "But who the hell goes home at 11 o'clock?"

"Me," she said, and in spite herself, she smiled. "Eleven. Always eleven. When the clock strikes 11:11, you should make a wish, right?"

Mike didn't know what she meant by that. But, well, it was already 11:11 anyway, so he said, "I wish I could see you again."

She blushed. Jane turned to leave, and Mike had a bright idea. "Maybe I'll call you El, then! Short for Eleven!" he shouted after her.

Jane shrugged and nodded. "I like it! Goodbye!"

It was only when she had already gone that Mike realized that he hadn't asked her if she was going to Hogwarts this year. If he was right and that she was the same age as him—which she obviously was, not that he's an expert on ages—then he would be meeting her again at school. He had made his wish on the 11:11 thing, after all, so maybe—

"MIKE!" Dustin yelled right into Mike's ear as he locked his arm around his neck. "It's good to see you, man!"

Mike turned his head and saw his best friends Dustin, Lucas and Will. Dustin was grinning from ear to ear, revealing his gums and lack of upper teeth, and his signature red and blue cap rested precariously atop his brown curls. He looked ecstatic.

Lucas was more subdued, standing behind Dustin, and was wearing a camouflage jacket over a plain, white shirt. The sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing a new silver bracelet that stood out against his dark skin.

Next to him, Will looked calm as ever. However, he wasn't looking at Mike—he was busy patting his bangs back to place, so Mike had a suspicion that Dustin had greeted him the same way he was greeting Mike now. Being the shortest in the group, Will was often knocked over by Dustin when he's being too hyperactive.

"Dustin, please don't choke him to death," Lucas advised. Mike

noticed that he was carrying a long, rectangular box in his hand.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing. He freed himself from Dustin's death grip.

Lucas shook it, making the contents inside rattle. "It's for my broomstick. You know, to keep it in good shape."

Dustin rolled his eyes and reached for Mike's leftover sundae. He put it out of arm's reach. "You shouldn't have asked him, Mike. Now we're gonna have to launch into *another* lecture about the intricacies of a broomstick's twig—"

"Shut up," said Lucas hotly. "As if you're any better. All you can talk about all summer was dragon this, dragon that, unicorns are this, unicorns are that—"

"For the last time, Lucas, magical creatures are an important part of the wizarding world. A unicorn's horn, for instance—"

*"I don't care about a unicorn's horn!"*

*"Well maybe you should!"*

*"Yeah, maybe. When I FINALLY see a bloody unicorn, that is!"*

*"SERIOUSLY, LUCAS, YOU ARE SUCH A—"*

"Hey Mike." Will ambled up to him and smiled slightly at the sight of Lucas and Dustin bickering. Mike figured that only someone with a patience like Will's (which seemed to be unending), could stand their friends' frequent arguments. "You were with someone?"

"Huh?" he said, confused.

Will pointed at the barely touched strawberry ice cream still sitting on the table. "That. It looks like someone just left it."

Mike tried not to panic. "I-it's Nancy's. She was, uh, with me earlier."

They seemed to accept his answer. Indeed, Dustin grinned so widely his face looked like it was about to split. "I see. This is therefore a



rare artifact," he said as he held up the spoon lodged in the pink dessert. "Nancy Wheeler's spoon, everyone."

"That's gross," said Mike, although he knew that it wasn't really Nancy's. "Why would you want my sister's utensils?"

"Research. Duh."

"You're hopeless," said Lucas, shaking his head. "And gross, just like Mike said."

Dustin shrugged and placed the spoon back down. "Whatever. Hey, you all ready to go to that new shop?"

"Yeah," said Will enthusiastically. Lucas and Mike bobbed their heads in unison, which seemed to amuse Dustin, who beamed and said, "Wow. You trained them nicely, Byers."

"Shut up," Lucas said again.

"Let's just go," said Mike before they could start arguing again. "I'm supposed to meet my mum by noon."

The four of them walked through the streets of Diagon Alley, chatting and pointing at the displays that interested them. Lucas ogled the broomstick handles at the Quidditch shop, while Dustin rambled on and on about the hippogriff he had encountered during his vacation to a politely listening Will. Mike trailed behind them, deep in thought. Why hadn't he told them about Ja—El? It wasn't like she was this huge secret; there wasn't anything embarrassing about their encounter (okay, maybe there was, but that's not the point), so why didn't he tell them?

And he had promised to introduce her to them, for chrissake. What was holding him back?

Mike tried to think of a rational explanation, but all he could come up with was a stupid feeling that he wanted to—at least for now—keep her to herself. He was hopeless, and as Nancy would put it, "totally crushing" on a girl he had just met. He eyed his friends, debating whether or not he should tell them.

They wouldn't tease him, would they?

Mike watched as Dustin laughed at Lucas's new "jewelry".

Yep, they would *certainly* tease him. There was no doubt about that.

So he kept quiet all day and instead joined them as they gushed over the new D D board and figures sold at the shop. Mike told them about the money Nancy had given him, and they cheered loudly (Mike felt embarrassed at all the looks they were getting) as Mike paid for the goods on the counter. Mike let Dustin carry the game for him as he prowled through the aisles, checking out all the board games, figurines, and moving posters. He tuned out Will's voice as he reached for a cool looking binder, but immediately straightened when he heard what he was saying.

"...Hopper. Yeah. Cool, right?"

Hopper? Mike thought back to his conversation with Jane. *I'm Jane*, she had said, *Jane Hopper*.

"Totally," agreed Dustin heartily. "Oh man, I can't wait. I bet he could jinx anyone with his eyes closed."

"I thought he was retired?" asked Lucas. "Dad was upset when he did, said there was no finer Auror than him."

"Who are you talking about?" Mike forgot all about the binder and was now listening intently.

Will blinked at him. "Jim Hopper. You know him, don't you? You got a poster of him and he's always at the cards you get in chocolate frogs."

"What about him?" pressed Mike.

"He's going to teach at Hogwarts, Mike!" Dustin thumped his back.

"He is?" he asked weakly.

Will nodded. "Yeah. My mom told me. I met him a couple times, too. She and him used to be classmates, I think."

"What's he like?"

"Tall. Gruff. Kinda scary, I guess."

"Does he have a scar?"

"Is he really a werewolf?"

"Does he wear a leather jacket?"

"Why would he wear a leather jacket?"

"Dunno. Just a thought."

"What is he teaching?" asked Mike.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts, I think." Will seemed to remember something. "Oh, his daughter's starting at Hogwarts this year."

Dustin grinned. "Bet she's a badass."

"Yeah. So don't try to talk to her, Dustin. If she doesn't turn you into a parrot, her dad will." Lucas said dully.

Mike laughed along with the others on the look of horror on Dustin's face, but it was forced and sounded more like coughing. Could *the* Jim Hopper be Jane's dad? Mike idolized him, of course. Like Lucas had said, he was the best Auror in the wizarding world. He caught plenty of Dark Wizards and had even fought the most evil wizard of all, Martin Brenner, several times. Mike had seven cards with his moving photo on it.

There was some part of him that was happily looking forward to taking classes from Jim Hopper...

But Mike had just met his daughter, who, contrary to what Lucas had said, didn't look like a girl who would curse someone. *This is insane. And awesome. But still insane.*

...and the other part of him wished that he wouldn't kill anyone who wants to be friends with his daughter.

"Uh-oh," said Lucas, as he tapped Mike's shoulder. "Your sister is coming."

Nancy burst through the shop doors and said, "I've been looking everywhere for you! Come on! Mum's going to be so worried."

She ignored Dustin's pathetic attempt at a hello and pulled a slightly dazed Mike with her. He heard his friends shouting "I'll write tomorrow!" and "See you at King's Cross!" before Nancy tugged at his arm and rounded a corner.

*This school year has become interesting, thought Mike absently. And it hasn't even started yet.*

### 3. The Weirdo on Hogwarts Express

Heyyo. First of all, thank you to Mattiazzo, iAmCC, darthstormer, and that one Guest for leaving a review. Your feedback are very much welcome and appreciated, and it helps encourage me to write more.

**Note:** some of the magical beings and plants that I will introduce in the story (like Dustin's Trapper), are my *own* creations, so if you don't recognize them from any of the HP books and movies, it's because I made them up.

**Disclaimer:** I do not own Stranger Things or Harry Potter.

#### Chapter Three: The Weirdo on Hogwarts Express

THE last two weeks of summer passed by in a blur, and soon enough, Mike found himself scurrying around his bedroom, hurriedly arranging all his things into the open trunk lying on the mattress. The enormous thing took up half of his bed, and just looking at it and all the heavy things it contained made Mike's arms ache.

It was the first of September, which meant that it was the day Mike and his friends would finally be starting at Hogwarts. Mike had spent the entirety of last night admiring his newly purchased wand (Mahogany, Phoenix feather, eleven inches, supple), as it provided light for him to write a campaign on his notebook under the covers, and spent the last two weeks reading through his course books and resisting the temptation of hexing his older sister. He was still underage, so the use of magic outside school was prohibited; Mike almost broke this rule three days ago, when Nancy had 'accidentally' spilled juice all over his trading cards, which he was laying out on the kitchen table.

The crisis was averted when Mrs. Wheeler, with a poke of her wand, ad fixed Mike's cards before he could kick his sister at the shins.

Aside from Hogwarts, Mike had also thought a lot about Jane. He knew that it was ridiculous to be so smitten with a girl whom he had virtually talked to for only an hour, but for some reason, he can't

erase the memory of her brown hair and eggo necklace from his mind. He supposed that it came from the fact that he had met her in such an unusual (and embarrassing) way, but he knew that that wasn't it—somehow, she had taken a hold of him in a way that he could not understand. He wanted to ask Nancy about it, but just the thought of talking to his sister about a girl he *potentially* liked made him shudder.

And so Mike kept her to himself. He didn't even mention Jane in the letters he had sent to his friends, or to his mother, whom he knew would only be thrilled about her son being *taken* by a girl, and would insist on knowing who said girl was. Besides, how would he explain it? He was only eleven—people don't (potentially) fall in love at this age, right? It was just wrong; but still, he did not know why she would not leave his thoughts, and why, ever since they had met, he had been watching the clock and waiting for 11:11 to strike.

Presently, Mike threw a pair of socks on top of his new books, made sure that his potions ingredients were safely locked, and afterwards tried in vain to bury his boxer shorts under all the school stuff. If his trunk suddenly gets knocked over (meaning: pushed by clumsy idiots like Dustin and himself), then he certainly did not want his underwear to be the first thing spilling from it.

He wanted to make a good first impression, and revealing his red and white striped boxers to Hogwarts just wasn't how Mike was planning to do it.

He placed his set of brass scales on top of the pile, hoping that the added weight would press his embarrassing clothes closer to the bottom of the trunk. Once Mike had finally stashed his extra pair of earmuffs—his mother had insisted that he bring them, and he knew better than to argue with her—into the last available space, he let out a relieved sigh.

"All right," he said, as he surveyed the trunk's contents and checked each item off an imaginary list. "Let's see...books, check. Telescope, check...school robes—slightly crumpled, but oh well—check...and my wand..."

Mike's eyes widened when he realized that his wand wasn't anywhere

to be found. He quickly riffled through his things again, but realized with a sinking feeling that it wasn't there. He dropped on all fours and peeked under the bed, but aside from a few comic books and a hidden stash of sweets, it was empty. He scrambled back to his feet and checked his drawers, closet, and even the small waste bin at the corner of the room. There was no sign of his wand.

"Come on," he muttered. "Where are you?"

He lifted Han's cage, and the owl flapped its grey wings in surprise. Nope—no wand there. That should have been obvious, but he did not care. He needed to look at everything.

"*Shitshitshit*," he said, panicking. He put the cage down. "*Shitshitshit*—"

"Mike," he heard his mother call from downstairs. "Are you done? We have to go."

"Yes, Mum! Just—" he frantically threw the covers off his bed and searched under the pillows. "Just give me a second—"

"Well, hurry up. Nancy's already waiting outside."

"Okay!"

Where the hell did he put it? Mike thought back to the last time he had taken it out, which was basically just *last night*; he clearly remembered placing it back to its rectangular box and...then what? He can't exactly remember what he did next.

Groaning in frustration, he did the last thing he wanted to do: ask his Mum. Mike bounded down the steps two at a time, patting his dark hair into place, and burst into the living room, where his mother was already waiting with Holly by the door. The door was open, and he saw Nancy, with her trunk resting beside her, already standing by the front lawn. Her back was to them, and she seemed to be tapping her foot impatiently.

"Michael! Are you finished? Where's your—" Mrs. Wheeler began, but Mike cut him off.

"Wand."

"What?"

"My wand," clarified Mike. "Have you seen it?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Mum!" Mike rubbed a hand to his face. "Have you seen it?"

Mrs. Wheeler raised an eyebrow. "*You lost it?*"

"What? No! I mean, maybe, but—" he waved his hands. "I don't know. Have you seen it, though?"

"Mum?" Nancy called from outside. "What's taking so long? We'll miss the Portkey if we don't hurry."

"No," she said to Mike, ignoring Nancy for the moment. "Michael Wheeler, that is so irresponsible of you. We've talked about this many times already. What did I tell you about keeping track of your things?"

"I can't remember," he said honestly. Before his mum could respond, he ran back to his room. "I'll find it, promise!"

Mrs. Wheeler shook her head and sighed. Her daughter was right; they were losing precious time, and the Portkey won't wait.

She lifted her wand in the air. "Accio Wand!"

Mike yelped and fell on his butt as the familiar box suddenly shot out from the gap between the closet and the floor. It slid across the length of the room and stopped right before his feet. The rectangular lid flew off, and his wand floated from the violet cushions and zoomed down the stairs with a *whoosh*.

"Michael, I got it!" Mrs. Wheeler informed him.

"Okay, mom!" he said, scratching the back of his neck. He pulled himself up by grabbing the edge of his bed. "Thanks!"

He shut his trunk, grabbed Han's cage, and with difficulty, heaved everything down the stairs. When he passed by his mum, she held his



wand out to him, and Mike accepted it with a quiet "thanks, mum" before joining Nancy at the front lawn.

"About time," said Nancy when she saw him dragging his luggage across the grass.

"Good morning to you, too," he said grumpily. His first day of school, and he was starting off in the wrong foot.

Nancy just rolled her eyes as Mrs. Wheeler and Holly joined them. They're father won't be seeing them off—he had work at the Ministry. *And besides,* thought Mike, *it's not like it would make a difference whether he was here or not.* Ted Wheeler had the ability to seem invisible most of the time, and if Mike was being completely honest with himself, he wasn't going to miss his dad that much.

The four of them surrounded a lone, tin can that looked oddly out of place in the middle of their pristine front lawn. The can was rusty and bent at odd angles, and Mike wondered why they didn't choose something more normal. Or clean. Mrs. Wheeler adjusted her grip on Holly, who squirmed in her arms, and checked the golden watch strapped to her wrist. Minutes passed; Mike tightened his hold on the handle of his trunk and Han's cage as he waited.

Finally, the can glowed, bathing the surrounding grass in a faint, blue light, and Mrs. Wheeler said, "Okay, touch your fingers to the can, everyone. Whatever happens, do not let go. Understood? Good. Gather your things—Mike, stop moving—and hold!"

Mike pressed two of his fingers to the side of the can—he shut his eyes as he was yanked off his feet—Holly was giggling beside him—he could feel Han thrashing around in his cage—Mike's head was reeling, and he thought that this was worse than Floo travel—

His feet hit solid ground with such force that it made his knees buckle. Luckily, he didn't fall, but a shudder passed through his body at the impact. Han squawked loudly, and Mike put him down so that he could clutch the side of his head. He felt dizzy.

As Mike got his bearings back, he saw Nancy standing next to him, seemingly unfazed by the whole thing, and Mike looked past her to

see that they were in a deserted alley. People were rushing on the streets, not even giving a glance at them, and Mike assumed that the mouth of the alley had been protected with enchantments. A huge trash bin was slung haphazardly across the path, spilling garbage onto the pavement, and graffiti was sprayed on the high, brick walls on either side of them. Nancy walked over to the fallen trash bin, kicked its contents back inside, and set it upright. Mike wrinkled his nose—count on Nancy to clean up some unknown place after magically transporting there.

"Right. This way," Mrs. Wheeler picked up Holly and walked away, Mike and Nancy following behind her with their trunks.

"What's the point of being a wizard if we can't even make our stuff float?" asked Mike, panting, because Merlin, these things were *heavy*.

"We're in a Muggle area. We can't use magic here," replied Nancy in a tone that suggested he was being stupid. "Look—there's King's Cross."

They quickly dumped their possessions into separate trolleys (Mike hadn't been more thankful in his life), with Mike placing Han's cage on top of his enormous trunk, and proceeded to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. King's Cross was packed with Muggles going about their usual business, and some of them gave him and Nancy strange looks as they passed; despite their Muggle clothing, he supposed it still wasn't normal to go around with what seemed to be an ancient chest and owl.

"We only have ten minutes left," said Mrs. Wheeler. She faced the brick wall between platforms nine and ten. "Go on."

Nancy, after making sure that no one was looking their way, quickly pushed her trolley towards the wall and vanished. Mrs. Wheeler nodded for Mike to follow.

Mike shrugged and took a deep breath. He broke into a sprint, and a few seconds later, he was on a platform—this one swarming with witches and wizards wearing colorful robes and students pushing trolleys similar to his—and was facing a magnificent, scarlet train where hundreds of kids were already waving goodbye to their families.

## *The Hogwarts Express.*

"Move along," his mother said as she gently pushed him forward.

Mike's face broke into a grin. The excitement in the air was so palpable, someone could cut it. The scattered pieces of chattering sounded like buzzing to his ears, and Mike heard the faint rumble of the train engines carry over the sounds. A large cat weaved between the crowd, while owls hooted in their cages, impatient for their freedom. The faint smell of burning coals tinged the air, and he wheeled his way over to the edge of the platform, where he had spotted Dustin, Lucas, and Will huddled together over something.

"Hi boys," said Mrs. Wheeler as they approached them. The three returned her greeting distractedly. She turned to Mike. "I'm just going to check on your sister, okay?"

"Okay." Mike watched her walk over to Nancy, who had already worn her school robes and Prefect badge. He turned back to his friends. "Hey guys."

"Mike," said Dustin—Lucas and Will were still bent over whatever it was they were looking at. "You're late."

"You're early," he said good-naturedly. He turned to Lucas and Will. "What're you looking at?"

Lucas stepped aside to reveal a potted plant resting on Will's palms. The plant was unlike anything Mike had ever seen: it was as big as his thumb, with tiny white thorns protruding from the folds of its five, wide petals like teeth; its stem was color black with dark purple streaks; and at its center, in the small hole that the petals surrounded, sprouted thin, writhing vines like tentacles.

"Where did you get that?" he asked. The thing looked rather scary.

"I'm glad you asked, mate, I'm glad you asked," said Dustin pompously. He took the plant from Will and continued: "I got this last week. Sorry I didn't tell you in my letter—I sort of forgot to mention it. Anyway, this is called a Flier Trapper."

"A Flier Trapper?"

"Yeah. I mean, it's scientific name is *Fliverius Trapensis*, but let's just call it a Trapper," he explained. "I got it from this man I met in the Leaky Cauldron. Mum and I visited Diagon Alley last week, and after we brought food for her cats, we went down the Leaky Cauldron to get some drinks. Anyway, I met this man there and we played Wizard's chess. He had the board all ready and set, but there was no one with him. He just looked so miserable sitting there alone with no opponent, you know? So I told mum I'm going to play with him and —"

"Just get to the point," said Lucas sharply.

Dustin shot him a look. "Basically, he appreciated what I did and said I was good at Wizard's chess, so he gave me this green bean as a token of gratitude. Anyway, I planted it and after a week—bam. It turned into this."

"Wait. So you literally just received a gift from a man you don't know?" said Lucas incredulously.

"Uh, excuse me. What did you think? That we didn't talk the whole time we were playing? Of course I know the man," scoffed Dustin.

"Oh yeah? What's his name, then?" asked Lucas.

"Uh. Eddy, I think."

"You think?"

"Or maybe it was Marlon? I dunno."

"Eddy and Marlon don't even sound the same!"

"I can't remember, okay? Who cares about his bloody name, anyway? Look, I talked to him and he said he used to work at an apothecary. Business went down, so he took jobs caring for magical creatures. That's it."

Will eyed the plant. "I don't know, Dustin. Lucas is right. You shouldn't be accepting things from strangers."

"Nonsense," he said. "It's cool, guys. The plant's been sitting in my

room for a week, and I'm not dead yet, so relax."

"For someone who's supposed to be the smartest one in the group, you could be pretty stupid sometimes," said Lucas.

Mike agreed with Lucas. Dustin was smart and all, but he could be wild about his obsession with strange, magical beings and plants. Mike remembered the time when he had taken two garden gnomes and built a makeshift fort in his room for them to live in. It didn't go well—Dustin's room got thrashed, with his comic books torn and his window broken, and his Mum had grounded him for two weeks. There was also the incident with the *Mimulus Mimbletonia*, wherein Dustin spilled goo all over Mike's basement when he had brought the plant with him one afternoon visit. It wasn't pleasant.

Dustin was tracing a finger on the Trapper's petal when the train whistled loudly, signaling its departure. Mrs. Wheeler, Sinclair and Henderson (Mrs. Byers was meeting them at Hogwarts) ambled up to them and rained kisses on their sons and Will. Mike, escaping his mother's arms with much difficulty, clambered up the steps and looked out the train door as it began to move. Mrs. Wheeler shouted after them: "Write to me when you get there! Good luck with the sorting, sweetie! And say hello to Joyce for me—"

The train rounded a corner, and Platform Nine and Three-Quarters vanished from sight. Mike and his friends walked down the cramped aisle, searching for an empty compartment, when somebody suddenly shoved Will out of the way and yelled, "Losers can't pass!"

Lucas, Dustin, and Mike whipped around and found two boys blocking the entrance to the next wagon. One of them had dark curly hair and an arrogant smirk, while the other had a body built like a barrel and a dopey smile that suggested he was nothing but an accomplice. The other first-years gave them a glance, but quickly turned away when they saw the two boys and drew the curtains to their compartments. The curly haired one fiddled with his necktie as he studied Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will with his small, malicious eyes.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "But you can't go here."

"And why's that?" asked Mike bravely.

"Because I said so," he replied. "You see, I don't want losers here in my wagon."

"Your wagon?" repeated Dustin. "Who are you, the conductor?"

"Very funny," said the boy. His mouth had turned into a thin line; apparently, he hadn't expected them to talk back. "My name's Troy Harrington. Ever heard of that name, loser?"

Mike wanted to say, *Duh. Of course, I know that name; your brother's been snogging my sister all summer*, but he kept his mouth shut and just stared hard at them. He fingered the handle of his wand, though he doubted if he'd be able to fight them when it came down to it. He did not want to get into trouble before they could even reach Hogwarts.

"Oh yeah, the Harringtons. I heard about them," said Dustin, nodding. "They're a bunch of pureblood gits from Slytherin, right?"

Troy's face contorted. "Think you could insult us, couldn't you? Well I know who you are: sandy hair, ugly face, and bizarre looking plants—you're the blood traitors, the Hendersons."

"I'm quite flattered with the recognition," said Dustin, placing a hand to his heart.

This seemed to annoy Troy even further. "How's your mom? Still off snogging Muggles?"

"Wow," said Lucas, rolling his eyes. "They really *are* gits."

"No one asked for your opinion," Troy's companion told Lucas. He eyed Lucas's dark skin and added, "Midnight."

"Hey!" said Mike loudly. "That's not a very nice thing to say!"

"Shut it, Frogface," Troy turned to his friend and said, "That's a good one, James."

James grinned. "Hmm. We should all give them names, then. There's Frogface and Midnight"—he pointed at Mike and Lucas, then faced

Dustin and Will— "and Toothless and Fairy."

"Very clever," said Dustin sarcastically.

"Yes, just wonderful," agreed Lucas.

"Your extreme thinking just blows my mind," added Dustin, clapping his hands.

Troy and James cracked their knuckles.

"Come on, guys," said Mike, as he tried to push past Troy. "Just ignore them."

Troy turned sideways to give Mike some room, and just as he passed him, he stuck his leg out and tripped him. Mike, losing his balance, fell, and his chin hit the floor with a loud crack. Troy and James laughed; Dustin and Lucas gasped, and the latter turned his eyes at Troy and yelled, "What was that for?"

Troy shrugged, uncaring. James continued to laugh beside him.

"Okay, that's it," said Lucas. He whipped his wand out and pointed it at the pair.

"Lucas, no!" said Will frantically. He was kneeling next to Mike, and he placed his hand on Lucas's arm to stop him. "We'll get in trouble!"

"Will, I know you love peace and all, but really, these jerks deserve it," Dustin told him.

Mike stood up, wiping the blood off his chin with the sleeve of his sweater. "It's all right, guys. Will's right. Leave it—we don't want to end up in Slytherin, now, do we?"

"Listen to Frogface," Troy advised them. He was eyeing Lucas's wand warily. "You can all stuff yourselves in stinkin' Hufflepuff. I heard their Head of House is that mad woman who teaches Divination. My dad said she's a waste of space. Don't know why Hogwarts would—"

Will looked offended. Mike, Lucas and Dustin collectively glared at the pair, and before anyone could blink, there was a mad flurry of

robes and the five of them had already taken out their wands—Troy had his on Lucas, and James was facing Dustin; Mike, however, pressed the tip of his wand right between Troy's eyes. The tension was thick, with Will's pleading voice the only thing breaking the silence, and Mike could see faces peering through their compartment windows, watching. Troy gulped nervously, trying to keep an eye on Mike's wand while also keeping his gaze on Lucas. Mike waited for someone to make the first move.

Troy was just about to say something when someone shouted, "*Impedimenta!*"

A sudden force knocked them apart, and Mike and his friends fell on the floor in a crumpled heap. Troy and James fell on top of each other, a tangled mass of robes, and Mike looked up just in time to see Nancy step over them and glower at him. His sister had her wand out, and based from the stern look on her face, she was the one who had cast the spell. Her Prefect badge shone brightly on her chest, and Mike, although annoyed at what she had done, had never been so glad to see her.

"Mike," she reprimanded. "What the hell are you doing, getting into a fight? I leave you alone for one minute, and look what happens! I'll tell mum about this! Do you even know how—"

"They started it!" he reasoned. He gestured at Troy and James, who were slowly backing away. "They said something bad about Will's mum, and we just couldn't let them get away with it, can we?"

"It's true, Nancy," said Dustin seriously. "Troy and James were insulting Mrs. Byers."

"Oh, shush," said Nancy haughtily. Seeing Will's face, she added in a soft voice, "I get it, I do. But you can't just go around cursing people. *Especially* not on the first day of school."

"Give them detention or something then," suggested Lucas.

"I can't. School hasn't started yet—not officially, anyway."

"This is bullshit."



"I'll say."

Nancy silenced them with a stare. "Look, I'll make sure that those two don't bother you anymore. Now could you please just go and find a compartment? I have to continue patrolling the train, and I can't do that if I have to constantly watch over you guys. Mike, could you promise not to get into any more trouble?"

Mike nodded grudgingly. She glared at Troy and James, and they ran back to their compartment. Nancy sighed and shook her head, and after one last look at them, she went off to check on the other first-year students. Dustin picked up the Trapper, which had slipped from his grasp due to all the commotion earlier, and inspected it for any signs of damage. Satisfied, he hugged it close to his chest and smiled.

"Hey Will, you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Will. He dusted off his sleeves. "I'm fine. Thanks guys."

Lucas patted his shoulder. "No problem, man. I think Troy actually pissed his pants earlier."

"You think?"

"Oh yeah. Bet he didn't expect Nancy to show up."

Mike laughed. "She is kind of scary."

"Impedimenta!" said Dustin in a high-pitched voice that was supposed to be Nancy's. "Merlin, she's a badass."

"Okay, that's enough. We are *not* going to gush about my sister, all right?" said Mike.

Dustin pouted, but Mike ignored him. Together, the four of them set off to find an empty compartment, but found out no sooner than three wagons later that it was no easy task. They walked in a line, with Lucas at the lead, followed by Dustin, Will, and Mike. Dustin cursed as the Trapper shook violently, and a few seconds later, it grew from the size of a thumb to as large as the palm of his hand. Will shrieked as the plant seemingly coughed, and when it opened its petals, a puff of white smoke came out, engulfing them.

"Great," said Lucas dryly. "Just great."

He had stopped walking. The compartments were all occupied; they had taken too much time confronting Troy and James that they had not realized that of course, the older students would have already taken their usual compartments, and that the first-years who had more sense than them had stuffed themselves into all the available ones near the back of the train. Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will stood blocking the aisle, their backs to each other and at a loss, as Dustin's Trapper plant continued to emit white puffs of smoke embedded with tiny, shiny materials that closely resembled snowflakes. The flakes rained down upon them, and Mike's hair looked like someone had dumped white confetti over it.

"Shoot," said Mike. "All the compartment's been taken."

Will peered through one of them, but a Ravenclaw girl drew the curtain when she saw him. "Yeah. And they don't look like they want to share."

"Well, after what happened earlier, I guess I couldn't really blame them," said Mike.

"Maybe we can hang out with the Prefects?" asked Dustin hopefully.

"Blimey, Dustin!" said Lucas irritably. He shook his sleeve, and a few flakes fell from it. "Put that thing away!"

"Sorry," said Dustin, and he held the potted plant out farther from his body. "But there's nothing I can do! I can't just hide it in my robes, you know."

"Then stuff it in your trunk! Put a lid on it or something! Just get rid of it—it's getting all over my hair and robes—"

"Boo-hoo. Lucas's style is ruined, how *tragic*! Seriously, Lucas, stop whining. It's not doing you any harm, is it?"

"Not doing any—I can't even—"

"That one looks empty," said Will suddenly; he was pointing at the compartment at the very end of the train, which seemed, from where

they were standing, empty and available.

Dustin squinted his eyes. "Are you sure? It's hard to see from here."

Lucas shrugged and said, "Let's check it out, then."

"Right," agreed Mike. "Move on. It's getting crowded in here."

Indeed, some of the students had went out of their compartments to greet some of their acquaintances and were now prowling the aisles. They squeezed themselves against Mike and his friends, who remained where they were, and shot them dirty looks. Lucas, who was at the lead, took that as a cue and started walking over to their target. Dustin followed, holding his plant aloft, with Will and Mike behind him. When they had finally reached the end of the wagon, Lucas stopped and looked through the glass window of the compartment.

"How is it?" asked Will.

Dustin pressed his face to the glass, his cheek touching Lucas's, and said in a loud whisper: "Oh great, another nutcase."

Lucas stepped back from the window as if it had burned him. "At least now we know who's going to be the weirdo of this batch."

"What are you talking about?" said Mike, confused.

Lucas pointed inside the supposedly 'empty' compartment. Dustin and Will—who had placed himself next to Dustin and was watching curiously from the window—spied through the glass, and as Mike went closer, he saw them ogling the girl inside the compartment like she was some sort of attraction in a zoo. Lucas srolled his eyes while the two continued to gaze at the unknown girl. Mike, irritated at how his friends were behaving, pulled them back by the shoulders with a frown.

"Stop it," he scolded them. "What if she sees you and you creep her out?"

"She's creeping me out!" protested Lucas.

"How's that?" asked Mike. "She didn't even do anything."

"I don't know," chirped Dustin, shooting another look through the glass. "It doesn't seem like she saw us. She's too busy reading that damn book on her lap."

"And that makes her creepy how?"

"Look at her, Mike!"

Mike, curious, finally gave in and stole a glance at the girl—then promptly gave out an odd scream which he quickly tried to mask with a cough.

It was Jane. She looked different from the last time they had met, though. She had already worn her uniform, and her curly brown hair had been pulled up in a sloppy bun, held in place by none other than her very own wand. Her one-of-a-kind necklace still hung from her neck, but now it wasn't alone—several other necklaces joined it, their designs ranging from large brown beads strung together to bizarre looking pendants of fangs and trading cards. Her messenger bag was slung across her chest, and Mike noticed that she had pinned several badges on it. A few keychains—enchanted so that the small figures could move—hung from the handle of her bag like tinsel.

"She has a Chudley Cannons badge!" Dustin pointed out helpfully.

Mike stared at her. Jane looked like a walking, talking thrift store.

"Do you think she's Muggle-born?" asked Will.

Dustin shrugged. "Maybe. Why does she have all that stuff, though?"

"Beats me," answered Lucas. He turned around to leave. "But I wouldn't want to have anything to do with her. It's bad enough that Troy and James think we're total losers. Just imagine what else they'd say when they see us with a weirdo."

"A weirdo?" said Mike, and his voice rose slightly.

"Yes, Mike," said Lucas. "Look at her. Now come on. If anyone thinks we're friends with her—"

"Mike?"

They were so busy talking that they hadn't noticed the compartment door sliding open. All four of them whipped around to see Jane leaning by the entryway, eyeing them—or rather, Mike—with confusion. She tilted her head, and her wand slid off her bun, releasing it. Her brown locks tumbled down her shoulders as she caught her wand and absent-mindedly put it on the front pocket of her robes.

Still looking at the four gaping boys before her, she repeated, "Mike?"

Mike could feel his friends' eyes on him. He was still staring at Jane, and from the disgusted looks on his friends' faces, he can only assume that he must have looked stupid. He tried to come up with something to say, but the only thing that came to his mind was 'pretty', which was the same word he had told her the first time they met, and he was quite sure that if he had said that, then his friends would not let him live it down. Moments passed; the silence seemed to go on forever, until—

"So!" Dustin said loudly. "Who is this lovely lady, Mike?"

Mike snapped out of his daze. He raised a shaky hand and said: "Hi Jane."

Her face lit up instantly. "It really is you!"

Jane, to his complete shock, suddenly pulled him into a hug. Her thin arms wrapped around him, with her head buried in his neck, and she was squeezing him so tight that Mike had trouble breathing (not that he was complaining, of course). Lucas looked scandalized; Dustin and Will stood to the side, with the former giving Mike a thumbs-up. Mike awkwardly placed his hands to Jane's back, his face red, but before he could properly return her hug, she pulled away.

"The 11:11 thing was true, after all!" she said happily.

"Um. Uh—yeah, yeah. Seems like it is." Mike let out a weak laugh. He could see his friends demanding for an explanation, and he mouthed *I'll tell you later*.

She looked at him expectantly. Mike raised his eyes to the ceiling, where a *very interesting* cobweb stretched out from the roof to the edge of the compartment. His hands felt clammy; why was he so nervous? Jane stepped back and eyed him with concern. One of her keychains, a small plastic figure of a blue pixie, tried to escape.

"Nice keychain," he said stupidly.

Dustin slapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh my gods."

The tips of Mike's ears turned pink. The five of them were *still* standing there in the aisle, with Dustin's Trapper continuously shooting up flakes over them, and Mike was just about sure that the train was going to suddenly derail just to end this moment when Will, bless his heart, spoke.

"So you two know each other?" he asked Jane.

Jane nodded. "Yes."

When she did not elaborate, Mike stepped in and added, "We met at Diagon Alley three weeks ago. She, uh, helped me back in Flourish and Blotts."

"And we ate ice cream at Florean Fortescue's," said Jane, smiling wistfully.

This seemed to peak Dustin's interest. He narrowed his eyes at Mike, then said carefully, "Oh. Did you happen to like strawberry ice cream?"

*Bastard*, thought Mike. He seemed to have put two and two together; Mike felt like a filthy liar for telling them that it was Nancy who was with him that day, and it looked like Dustin was planning on rubbing it on his face. He stepped closer to Jane, careful not to let his Trapper touch her, and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Jane looked confused. "Y-yes. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," shrugged Dustin. "It's my favorite flavor, that's all."

This seemed to please Jane. "Really? It's my favorite, too!"

He gave Mike a sly grin. Mike tried not to roll his eyes at Dustin's pathetic attempt at making him jealous (and why should he be jealous in the first place? Mike doesn't even like Jane that way. *Not at all*), but he didn't have to, because Lucas did it for him.

"The weirdo likes strawberry ice cream, cool," he said tonelessly, and Mike wanted to punch him for some reason. "Let's go."

Will's brows furrowed. "But there's no available—"

"Doesn't matter! Come on—"

Dustin suddenly said to Jane, "Hey, can we sit with you?"

Lucas's eyes widened. "You're sitting with the weirdo?"

"Lucas," said Mike, exasperated. "She's standing right there." He turned to Jane. "Yeah. Train's already full; we can't find any empty compartment. Of course, that's only if it's okay with you—"

"You can come sit with me," she said, smiling hopefully at each of them. "I don't mind."

"Actually, we—" Lucas began, but Dustin pushed past him and knocked him against a wall before he could finish.

"Sweet!" he said, grinning. He coughed as he inhaled some of the Trapper's smoke. "Thanks, Jane!"

Dustin entered the compartment with a loud, "Finally!" before throwing himself down on the cushions. He slid down the seat dramatically, with his arms hanging limply at his sides and the Trapper resting on his stomach. Will, after smiling tentatively at Jane, followed suit. He was much more reserved than Dustin, though; he sat by the window, his hands clasped on his lap, watching the scenery outside with a serene look on his face.

Lucas looked like he was about to spontaneously combust.

Mike gave his best friend a look; if Lucas would rather spend the whole trip standing, then he would let him. He was being too proud for his own good, and Mike did not like the way he kept calling Jane

a weirdo after she had kindly offered them her compartment.

"Thanks, Jane," he said, and he settled into the seat opposite Dustin and Will.

Jane remained standing by the door, apparently waiting for Lucas to enter. Her gaze was steady on him, and Mike had to admire Lucas's stubbornness—if it had been Mike, he would have said yes to those eyes the moment it landed on him. Lucas remained rooted to his spot, and it was obvious that he was at odds with himself: rejecting Jane would sentence him to wandering the train alone, but accepting her offer would also mean hanging out with her, and he did not like both options. Apparently deciding that it was better to be with the party, he went inside and squeezed himself next to Dustin.

Smiling, Jane slid the compartment door close and dropped herself beside Mike. Minutes passed in relative silence. The Trapper had closed its petals, so for now they were smoke-free, and that seemed to lift Lucas's spirits. He took out a book entitled *Quidditch Through the Ages* and started going through the pages with the utmost passion.

"I like that book, too," said Jane quietly.

Lucas peered at her. "You do? Cool."

"Cool," she repeated.

Lucas, in an obvious attempt to appear more civilized, asked: "Do you know anything about Quidditch?"

"Yes," she said excitedly, and Mike blinked at her in surprise. "I know how to play."

"You do?" asked Lucas skeptically.

Jane nodded, blushing. "Yes. My dad thought me last summer, and I've been practicing on my broom every day."

Lucas was starting to eye her with the beginning of respect. "What's your broom?"

"A Shooting Star," she replied, and she seemed embarrassed. "It's



really old. But it's still great, though. I want to be a Chaser, see? I want to be in my house team—"

"Me too," said Lucas. "I've got a new Cleansweep."

Dustin pressed his hands to his ears. "Oh gods, here we go."

Lucas ignored him, and he spent about an hour discussing brooms and Quidditch with Jane, who was listening intently. They watched with wonder as she gave her opinion on the new models and the teams competing in the World Cup, and by the middle of their talk, she seemed to have gotten Lucas's approval.

Mike smiled; Jane was so enthusiastic that it was hard not to feel happy, too. She was still talking in the same soft voice Mike had heard her use when he first met her, but every now and then it would burst with excitement and she would laugh—a sweet, girlish sound that resembled the tinkling of bells. Will, ever polite, listened to their discussion and nodded whenever Lucas turned to him for confirmation about something.

As Lucas started to expound on the chances of the Irish winning this year's World Cup, the compartment door slid open to reveal a plump witch pushing a trolley filled with candies and sweets. Lucas looked annoyed at the interruption, but Dustin immediately stood up, and the rest of them followed soon after. They bought enough snacks to last the trip: a box of chocolate frogs and Berty Bott's Every Flavor Beans, a lot Pumpkin Pasties, a dozen licorice wands, and tarts. They dumped the items on their seats and started munching on them just as the sun went down.

"Hey Jane," said Dustin suddenly. He popped a bean in his mouth and immediately gagged. "Ugh—pepper. My name's Dustin Henderson, by the way." They all gave him skeptic looks. "What? Haven't you noticed? We were talking here for hours and yet we haven't introduced ourselves yet."

Will looked surprised. "You're right."

"Of course I am."

"I'm Will," he told Jane softly. "Will Byers."

"Lucas Sinclair," said Lucas distractedly. He was busy opening a box of chocolate frogs. "Hah! Got you!"

"Who's in the card?" asked Will.

He held it up for them to see. In the card was a photo of a wizard wearing a black robe lined with thick fur, grayish hair, and with a black pipe hanging between his lips. At the bottom read, "*JIM HOPPER*" in cursive writing. The man on the photo scowled and left, leaving the card blank.

Lucas groaned. "I already have, like, *five* of him."

"Can I have it?" asked Jane shyly.

"Sure." He tossed the card to her, and she held it in her palms reverently.

The compartment door slid open again, and Lucas groaned, "What now?"

"Hello, Midnight," greeted Troy. James stood behind him, smirking.

Mike's fists clenched. "What do you want?"

"We want payback," he replied.

"What?"

"Your sister wiped us out earlier, but now that she isn't here, we'll make sure that you pay for pointing your wands at us."

"If you've already forgotten, you kind of did the same thing earlier," said Dustin. He unwrapped a pumpkin pasty and took a bite. "And Nancy also wiped us on the floor, so there's that."

"Shut it, Toothless," snapped James.

"Leave them alone," said Jane firmly.

"Well, well, who's this?" Troy sneered when his eyes landed on Jane.

"You're all pathetic, you know that? Always needing girls to fight for you."

He noticed the card still clutched in Jane's hands. He took a step forward and snatched it away, Jane gasping in surprise, and held it up to the light to examine it closer. Troy laughed and waved it in the air.

"You collect these?" he asked, then he saw Jane's collection of strange necklaces and laughed even harder. "Weirdo."

"Hey," said Lucas angrily, for he, too, had called Jane a weirdo for a few times.

"Give that back to her," ordered Mike.

"Frogface's going to defend her," cooed James. "How cute."

This seemed to amuse Troy to no end. "Frogface and Weirdo sitting on a tree, K-I-S—"

*"Petrificus Totalus."*

He was not able to finish his song. Troy's whole body suddenly went rigid, and the card fell out of his grasp. His arms and legs were glued together, his mouth was clamped shut, and he only managed to move his eyes from side to side. They watched as he teetered for a moment, before finally falling backwards onto James like a heavy, marble statue. James looked up and yelped when he saw Jane, her wand still aloft, moving towards him.

"Go," she said simply.

He obeyed. Grabbing Troy's body, which was so upright that his feet and head kept hitting the walls, he quickly retreated to their compartment. The four boys kept their gazes on Jane, who stooped down to pick up the fallen card from the floor. She turned around, smiled at them, and sat back into her seat as if nothing happened.

"That was..." said Will, clearly at a loss for words.

"Awesome," supplied Lucas, to which Will nodded.

Jane smiled again, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she straightened the creases of the card and placed it on the breast pocket of her robes.

A sudden thought occurred to Mike. "He's your father, right?"

Dustin sat bolt upright. The candy wrappers on his knees fell to the floor, and he started at Jane in wide-eye wonder.

"What?" he said, turning to Jane. "Wait. Your name is Jane Hopper?"

Jane tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "Yes. I didn't mention that, did I?"

"No," said Lucas, but without the usual venom Mike would have expected from him.

"Oh!" said Will, and he slapped a hand to his forehead. "You're the Jane Professor Hopper kept talking about with my Mum."

Jane smiled at him. "Does he? I met Mrs. Byers a couple of times. She's really nice."

Will beamed at the compliment.

"I can't believe this," said Dustin. He regarded Will and Mike as if they were criminals facing trial. "You knew about her and didn't even mention her? Not even once?"

Will raised his hands. "How am I supposed to know that we would meet her?"

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Seriously, Byers? You just said that your Mum literally talks about her all the time."

"I didn't know that I was supposed to tell you guys about a girl my Mum *and* Professor Hopper was gushing about," retorted Will in an uncharacteristic bout of sarcasm. "Next time they gossip, I'll be sure to update you."

"Jesus, Will. I was just saying," said Dustin, clearly taken aback by the sudden hostility.

"All right, that's enough," said Mike, but that only served to turn Dustin's attention to him.

"This is Mike's fault, really," he said knowingly.

Mike looked at him in disbelief. "How come this is *my* fault?"

Jane watched their exchange in confusion. She seemed to be lost

"Oh, I don't know, Mike," Lucas finally answered. "Maybe you could have told us, 'Hey, remember that strawberry ice cream I told you was Nancy's? It wasn't really hers; it's Jane Hopper's, Jim Hopper's daughter. You know, the one I went on a fuckin' date with before you all showed up?'"

"It wasn't a date," Mike muttered.

"*It wasn't a date*," mocked Lucas. "You're pathetic."

"What's a date?" asked Jane innocently. She was looking at Mike with raised eyebrows.

"It wasn't a date!" Mike repeated loudly. Why he needed them to understand that, he had no idea. *For chrissake*. Mike took a deep breath and gathered himself. "Why is it such a big deal anyway?"

Dustin gestured to Jane. "Her dad's fuckin' Jim Hopper. Are you kidding me? That's insane! I bet"—he picked up the fallen candy wrappers and crumpled them so that they could become tiny balls of shiny paper—"she could blast these things one by one with her magic."

He threw the balls into the air, but Jane merely watched as they floated lightly in front of them. She did not take her wand out, and one by one the candy wrappers landed on the compartment floor, unharmed. Dustin looked disappointed.

"I guess she only uses magic against knuckleheads like Troy," he said firmly, because if there was one thing about Dustin, it was that he was never uncertain. "The point is, she's Jane Hopper and she's our friend. Hell, if you two had introduced us to her earlier, then maybe we could have avoided the whole thing with James and Troy back

there. She could have just blasted them away before Nancy could intervene."

"You mean you were going to use her?" asked Mike.

"What? No!" Dustin looked offended at the accusation. "It's only for safety purposes, you see. She'll help us, and we'll help her. It's a win-win situation. Her name would be enough to keep those mouthbreathers off bay—if her obvious badassery won't—and we—we'll be her new friends. How's that, Jane?"

Jane looked uncertain. "Friends?"

"Yeah," said Will. "You know, people who—"

"Who you would do anything for," Mike jumped in. "Friends—they tell each other everything. Things that parents don't know."

"They never break promise," added Lucas. "Especially when they spit."

"And they protect each other," emphasized Dustin. "Like hexing people who bother their other friends."

"Dustin!"

"All right, all right. Jeez."

Jane looked deep in thought. Mike remembered their talk back at the ice cream parlor, when she had told him that she didn't have any friends. She had a sad look on her face then, and he wondered what kind of life she had lead, especially since it seemed to be one that lacked the simple concept of friendship. What was she doing all this time? He imagined her shut up in a large house, surrounded by books and broomsticks, waiting as her father caught one dark wizard or another. It doesn't look like a happy life to him.

*And I thought my life sucked.* Besides, he had promised to give her friends, right?

Jane suddenly beamed. "Friends."

"Welcome to the party, Jane Hopper," announced Dustin. "Just

promise us that you'll only use your scary spells on the bullies and not us, then we're good."

"Dustin," said Mike, sighing.

"Promise," said Jane. She looked down, blushing, then said, "You have to promise me something, too."

Mike glanced at her. "What is it?"

She raised her eyes at him and smiled shyly. "I want you to call me 'El' instead of Jane."

"El?" said Lucas. "Uh, sure, I guess."

"Why 'El', though? It seems like a long shot from Jane," said Will curiously.

"Mike gave me that nickname," she replied. "And I like it."

Mike turned red. *She remembered*, he thought, smiling like an idiot. He didn't want to make a big deal out of it, but he couldn't help feeling a little elated at the fact that she had liked the nickname he had given her. Of course, he knew that it may only be because it was the first time someone had really talked to her and given her something she wanted, but still, it was *something*.

"Oh, did he?" said Dustin, wriggling his eyebrows suggestively. "What —"

Mike smacked him on the arm. "Sure, El."

El gave out a small laugh, and Mike chuckled alongside her. The train began to slow down as it neared Hogsmeade, and they straightened their robes and stuffed their leftovers in their pockets as the ride went to a stop. Mike, Lucas, Dustin (with his Trapper), Will, and El climbed down the train, and they found themselves being herded along with the other first years to the end of the platform, where an old witch with short silver hair and glasses was waiting for them.

"Good evening, first years," she said in a clear voice. "I am Madam Florence—or Flo, if you like—the head nurse in Hogwarts. I will

accompany you to the castle, where you will be introduced to the whole school through the sorting ceremony." The students looked at each other nervously. "Now, now, no need to worry. There's still plenty of time before the sorting. For now, let's all get you to the school. Follow me please."

She led them to the edge of an enormous, black lake where dozens of small boats were docked. Mike shuffled his feet in a feeble attempt to stop them from trembling; he had heard about the lake from Nancy when he was a child, when she frightened him with stories about the giant squid that was residing in its murky depths. Scolding himself for acting like a coward—*how are you going to be chosen in Gryffindor if you're afraid of some huge seafood?*—he lowered himself into one of the boats.

The small fleet cut across the lake, which looked like dark glass. Dustin balanced his plant on his knee, afraid that the constant rocking of the boat would throw it over the edge and into the water. Will, despite having virtually lived at Hogwarts since he was a kid, looked around in awe at the glowing lights of the lanterns hanging from the boats' prows.

"Wow," breathed El.

Mike followed her gaze. The castle loomed before them, standing in what appears to be—at least to Mike's view—a valley. Its windows glowed orange in the darkness, and torches gleamed besides the great front doors. Its turrets and towers soared high into the sky, and a long, arching bridge stretched out from the courtyard to a tower. Mike was awestruck; none of the books he had ever read about the school had managed to capture its true beauty.

The boats stopped. The students climbed down and followed Madam Florence up the stairs leading to the huge, front doors of the castle. Before she could seize the knocker, the door swung open, revealing the face that was on Jane's card.

"About time," said Jim Hopper roughly. His eyes settled on Jane. "Welcome to Hogwarts."



## 4. The Scent of Roses

Welcome aboard the STHP train, Septimus714 and eusticegertrude.

Happy New Year, everyone!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or Harry Potter.

### CHAPTER FOUR: THE SCENT OF ROSES

PROFESSOR Jim Hopper looked exactly like his photo on the chocolate frog card, from his fur-lined cloak, black pipe, and down to his unshaven beard. However, Mike thought that the photo had not quite captured the famous Auror's true character, which was, to put it simply, *intimidating*. He towered over the first years, who were all either glancing around nervously or talking in hushed tones, and he was gazing at them through narrowed eyes. Mike thought the professor's eyes looked rather like a beetle's: small, black, and unsettling. It was so different from El's, which were brown and soft, eyes that made you feel welcome and good; Professor Hopper's were hard, calculating, and the least bit friendly.

*Well, he didn't catch those dark wizards by looking all gentle and sweet,* thought Mike.

He was smiling, and perhaps it was his way of trying to put the children at ease, but all it did was make Mike shudder. Professor Hopper's smile looked rather much like a grimace — the corner of his lips twitched, and his bared teeth was shining menacingly in the dim light of the torches, reminding Mike of a werewolf. Apparently sensing that his smile was not helping — and deciding that it wasn't doing the muscles in his jaw any favor — he quickly dropped it and settled on his signature scowl instead. Secretly, Mike agreed with his chosen course of action. The professor's scowl may be fearsome, but his smile was scarier.

"Come on in," said Professor Hopper. He beckoned with his large hand, and the students timidly trailed after him as he led them up a flight of marble steps. Once he had reached the top, he spun around

to face them, and they all looked up at him in fright. "Now, now. No need to be nervous. I'm just here to assist you before the sorting begins." He turned to Madam Florence, who was standing at the foot of the stairs. "Thanks for bringin' them in, Flo."

Madam Florence nodded. "Pleasure. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll proceed to the Great Hall to inform the Headmaster that you're all here. Be nice to them, Jim."

"Uh-huh," said Professor Hopper, and he watched as the head nurse — who was shaking her head emphatically — vanished through the door to their left. He fingered the end of his pipe, which Mike noticed was not puffing out smoke. He returned his gaze to the students, studying them, and his brows furrowed as he caught sight of something in the back. "Hey, what happened to you?"

The first years craned their necks to see who he was referring to. The people in the back, particularly, were exchanging inquiring gazes, trying to ask who the professor was talking to without really uttering any words. They seemed too afraid to ask the professor who he was calling out, so they all remained quiet until, finally, someone spoke.

"Me, sir?" asked James loudly, pointing to himself. All the students turned around to look at him.

"Not you," he replied gruffly. He jabbed his pipe to the figure lying in James's arms. "*Him*."

Mike winced. Troy, who was still stuck in the Body-Bind Curse, was lying rigidly in James's arms. His eyes were wide, and from the way he kept on making a noise that sounded like humming, he was struggling to say something. Mike looked at El, who stood one step above him: her head was down, and although her hair was blocking most of her face from Mike's view, he could still see that her cheeks were tinged with pink. Slowly, she turned to him, and Mike gave her a reassuring smile. She did not return it. Instead, she gulped and stared nervously at her father, who was now fingering the handle of his wand.

Troy moved his eyes from side to side to emphasize his pleas, and James, apparently thinking that he wanted to be put down, gently

leaned his stiff body against the stair railing. This was a bad idea; Troy slipped on the marble step and rolled down the stairs like a log until his body hit the floor with a loud *thunk!*

"Troy! I'm sorry!"

James yelped and ran to pick him up. The students exchanged glances, and judging from the way they were biting their lips, it was obvious that they were trying hard not to laugh. A few seconds passed in strained silence and then —

Dustin snorted.

It was like someone flipped a switch. A burst of raucous laughter suddenly echoed throughout the hall, and Mike can't help it; he joined the other first years, chuckling, but when he looked up, he found El looking thoroughly horrified. He immediately stopped. He punched Lucas — who was guffawing so much that his shoulders shook — lightly on the arm, and his best friend turned to him, annoyed.

"What?" he said.

Mike simply pointed at El.

Lucas's eyes widened. Understanding what Mike was trying to say, he promptly stopped laughing and tapped Dustin (who was the *loudest* of the bunch) on the shoulder. The curly-haired kid shook his hand off, and Lucas, who wasn't really known for his patience, grabbed him by the arms and forced him to face El.

"Lucas, what the hell —"

Dustin, upon registering the look of pure horror on El's face, quickly stopped laughing. He coughed, adjusted his grip on the Trapper, and then said loudly, "Man, poor Troy. Yeah. Real tragic."

Will shook his head in disbelief. Professor Hopper, apparently deciding that the first years had had enough fun, pointed his wand at Troy and muttered the counter curse. Troy's arms and legs sprung apart, startling James, and he sat on the floor as he shook his hand to test it. After he was certain that the curse had indeed been lifted, he

stood up (Mike noticed that his entire face was red from embarrassment) and glared at El's general direction.

"Hey kid," called Professor Hopper. "What happened?"

Mike gulped and crossed his fingers. El looked like she was trying to disappear inside her cloak. The guys and her huddled together, waiting for Troy to rat them out, but they were surprised with the words that came out of his mouth.

"Nothing, Professor," he said, and James looked shocked. He flicked his eyes over to Mike and his group, and he added, "It was just an accident. Thank you for fixing me up, professor."

Lucas's eyebrows shot so high into his head that it almost disappeared into his hair. El looked confused, and Mike can't really blame her — he was pretty sure the world had just turned upside-down. Did Troy just seriously throw away an opportunity to get them punished? He turned to his friends for some sort of explanation, but he found that Will and Lucas were just as lost as he was.

Dustin, however, chuckled. "Looks like he won't admit that a girl kicked his ass."

*Oh.* Mike guessed that made sense. Professor Hopper said, "Huh," and tapped his boot on the floor, waiting for Troy to elaborate, but when he didn't, he simply shrugged and put down his wand. Mike and his friends let out a sigh of relief, and El, realizing that she wasn't about to be scolded by her father, stood up straight. However, Mike saw Professor Hopper staring at her, and he prayed that he wasn't about to make her admit to what she did; she was just protecting them, after all, and Mike was ready to testify to what had really happened if the professor decided that he did not believe Troy's lie.

His fears were ungrounded, though, because Professor Hopper chose to let the matter go. He went back to facing the first years and pretending to blow imaginary smoke from his pipe. This time, it was El who turned to him and gave a small smile. Mike smiled back.

"Okay, now that that's settled — what the hell is that?" said Professor Hopper gruffly.

Professor Hopper was squinting suspiciously at Dustin's Trapper, who had bloomed once more and was, again, puffing up white smoke. Lucas jumped away from the plant immediately, inspecting his cloak for any signs of dust. Even Mike and Will edged away from it, not wanting to look like a mess in the sorting ceremony later. Dustin got the full brunt of it; he looked like he had gone through a snow storm: his hair and cloak were covered in white flakes, and the Trapper lay coughing in his hands. Some students yelled as they tried to shoo away the flakes, and then it was pandemonium when they all started going down the steps at the same time so that they could avoid the smoke.

"*Immobulus*," said Professor Hopper, and the flakes floated in the air in slow motion. He massaged his forehead, and Mike could tell that he was trying hard not to get angry. "What is that?" he repeated to Dustin.

"It's a Trapper," he replied. Seeing the unimpressed look on the Professor's face, he tried for a toothy grin. "It's my plant. Awesome, huh?"

The Trapper spewed more smoke, and a flake landed on the tip of Professor Hopper's nose.

Dustin laughed nervously.

Lucas rolled his eyes and whispered to Will, "Idiot."

"Jesus, this is what I have to deal with in my *first hour* of teaching?" muttered professor Hopper. Mike wondered if the professor was even allowed to swear this much in front of them. "All right. Give me that."

Dustin hugged the plant closer to his body. "What?"

"I said give me the Trapper."

"No way! Uh — sir. Hopper, sir."

"For chrissake."

The professor's boots made a loud clicking noise as he descended the stairs. He stopped in front of Dustin, and putting his face close to his,

said in a dangerously low voice: "I suggest that you surrender that to Mr. Filch so that it won't interrupt with your meal later. Don't worry, Mr. Filch will just put it in your dormitory once the Sorting Hat determines which house you'll be in. You understand, do you?"

His tone made it clear that he would not allow any further arguments. Dustin flinched in the closeness of the professor's face, and he hesitantly offered his plant out to him. Professor Hopper nodded, and a man emerged from seemingly out of nowhere. Mike knew all about Mr. Filch, of course — Nancy had complained about him enough for him to remember his name — and Mike thought that his sister was spot on when she described him as a "nasty looking walnut". Mr. Filch had a sharp, gaunt face and long, wispy hair. He had yellow teeth and one of his eyes were bigger than the other. Trailing by his feet was an ugly looking cat (Mrs. Norris, Mike reminded himself) with lamp like eyes that didn't miss much. He eyed the Trapper like he wanted nothing more than to burn it.

Dustin noticed this, and he immediately pulled his arms back.

"I'll take that," Mr. Filch told Dustin, smiling wickedly.

"This is Mr. Filch, everyone. He's the castle's caretaker." Professor Hopper introduced. He nodded to Dustin. "Hand that over, kid."

Dustin looked like he wanted to argue; Lucas, sensing his friend's hesitation, gave him a slight push, and he reluctantly gave Mr. Filch the Trapper. Mike supposed that Lucas did that not because he was afraid that Dustin might get scolded by Hopper, but rather because he genuinely wanted the Trapper to be taken away. The caretaker frowned in disgust at the plant, and he slouched down the hall, muttering things Mike did not intend to repeat. El looked worried, but whether for the Trapper or Mr. Filch, he did not know.

"Take care of him! He shouldn't be lumped in with the other plants and animals! Keep him in a cold place!" Dustin shouted after Mr. Filch.

"Quiet," said Professor Hopper sharply. Dustin shut up. He looked at the huge oak doors before them and nodded. "About damn time. Come on, let's get you all sorted."

Mike and the others glanced at each other. Dustin still looked glum, but he perked up when he heard the word 'sorted'. Lucas rubbed his hands together as the doors opened, revealing what Mike knew was the Great Hall: it was a vast room lighted by hundreds of floating candles, with four long tables lined up on the marble floor, and a roof that was bewitched to look like the night sky. At the end of the room was a raised platform, where all the teachers were seated, and a golden lectern with an eagle design stood in front of them. The seniors watched as the first years walked down the aisle in a messy line, admiring the architecture, and they can't help but to promote their houses.

Professor Hopper walked briskly towards the platform, where a small wooden stool had been placed. On top of the stool sat the dirtiest hat that Mike had ever seen. It looked worn out, with creases at the rim and a drooping tip that made it look like it was bowing.

"What are we supposed to do?" whispered El to Mike.

"I don't know," he replied, and it was true — the sorting was the only thing Nancy and his parents refused to talk to him about. He turned to Will. "What are we supposed to do?"

Will smiled mysteriously. "You'll see."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Gee. Thanks, Will."

"I just don't want to ruin the experience for you."

"Yeah, okay. We aren't going to get hurt, right?"

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," interjected Dustin. He jutted his chin to the direction of the platform, and they watched as Professor Hopper stood next to the stool, holding a long scroll in his hands. "What if we have to, like, fight Hopper with a hat?"

"We'll fight my dad?" asked El, alarmed.

"With a hat?" Lucas said at the same time.

"That's ridiculous," said Mike quickly. He rounded on Dustin: "And don't call him Hopper."

"Oh yeah. Sorry. I forgot I'm not you," said Dustin slyly. "*Hopper's future son-in-law.*"

Mike blushed. "That's not — what are you —"

"No need to get flustered, buddy." Dustin patted him in the back.

"I am not flustered!" Mike countered.

"Yes, you are," said Lucas absently. "You're all red. You might want to rearrange your face; you don't want your father-in-law to see you like that."

Dustin and Lucas made kissy faces and laughed at the look on Mike's face.

"You guys are impossible. Will, a little help?"

Will's voice was patronizing. "Stop teasing him, guys."

"Thank you."

"Professor Hopper's going to kill you for that."

"Will!"

El laughed softly.

Mike turned to her, embarrassed, and said, "Just ignore them. They're assholes."

"It's all right," she said, still laughing slightly.

"Oh," said Mike, scratching the back of his neck. "Okay."

"Okay." El tilted her head and smiled widely.

"*Okay*," added Dustin sarcastically. El laughed again as Mike punched him in the arm.

"First years," said Professor Hopper. The whole hall went silent, and Mike and his friends stood at attention. "When I call your name, sit on this stool and put on the hat. The Sorting Hat shall determine



which house you'll be in, and when he does, kindly proceed to your house's designated table. Got it? Good. I won't explain it the second time."

"Jim," warned Madam Florence.

He waved her off. "Right. Will Byers!"

Will gulped and made his way over to the stool. His mother, Professor Byers, gave him a thumbs-up from her seat at the teacher's table. She put her hands over her mouth excitedly as Professor Hopper placed the hat on Will's head. It slipped right down his lips, so it looked like the hat ate his whole head, and some students laughed at how ridiculous he looked like. Mike saw Jonathan, Will's older brother, poise his camera from the Hufflepuff table.

"Wonder if he'll be in Hufflepuff," muttered Lucas.

Mike shrugged. "He could be. I mean, his whole family's there."

"So is yours," he said wistfully.

"Nah. Just on my dad's side of the family."

El tapped Mike's shoulder and gestured at Will. The hat seemed to have reached a decision. The whole hall held its breath, and then —

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Professor Byers stood and clapped; Mike smiled as Will proudly made his way over to the Gryffindor table, where several older students shook his hands. Jonathan waved at him and Will smiled.

"That was great, Will, honey," said Professor Byers loudly, and Will slid down the bench to hide his face.

For once, Professor Hopper's smile didn't look forced. "Next up: Dustin Henderson!"

"Oh yeah," said Dustin confidently, rubbing his hands together. "Wish me luck, guys."

"Good luck," said El seriously.

Dustin grinned at Professor Hopper when he reached him, and he shoved the hat roughly over Dustin's face. Minutes passed. It seemed to be taking a long time with Dustin. Then Mike saw the Sorting Hat's brim form into an amused smile, and after a few seconds, it shouted: "GRYFFINDOR!"

Professor Hopper grunted. Dustin slid off the stool and bowed, making the whole hall erupt with laughter. Lucas shook his head and did his favorite thing: roll his eyes. El looked genuinely happy for Dustin; she clapped along with the rest and was even going to go and hug him, until Mike pulled her back and gently told her that she could do it later. She looked disappointed.

Professor Hopper called several more students. Troy and James went to Slytherin, something that seemed to please them; a pretty girl (*Although*, Mike told himself, *not prettier than El*) called Jennifer was sorted to Hufflepuff; a pale girl with fiery red hair — who Lucas whispered to Mike looked "totally cool" — was sent to Slytherin; and so on and so forth until: "Lucas Sinclair!"

Lucas walked confidently to the front. His face was dotted with sweat, making his dark skin gleam like polished wood, and he sat on the stool with an air of utmost dignity. Mike knew where Lucas would be put even before the Sorting Hat shouted it — it was just so obvious with him. Lucas came from a family of accomplished Aurors, and out of all of them, he was most likely to win in a fist fight.

So when the hat yelled, "GRYFFINDOR!", Mike was not the least bit surprised. Lucas beamed and shook hands with the other Gryffindors like he won the position of Minister of Magic. Will and Dustin embraced him, and they all turned to look at Mike as if to say, *you better not screw this up*. Mike ignored them and instead set his gaze on El. Just the two of them left now.

"Michael Wheeler!" shouted Professor Hopper.

Shooting El what he hoped looked like a confident smile, Mike sat on the stool and waited for Professor Hopper to place the hat on his head. He caught a glimpse of Nancy's anxious face before his vision

became obscured by the hat.

"Another Wheeler, I see," a deep voice that he assumed belonged to the hat said.

Mike could feel sweat gather near his hairline, and although he wanted to wipe it away, he couldn't really do anything about it — the Sorting Hat fell to the tip of his nose. He closed his eyes instead and concentrated; he wished he was put in Gryffindor with his friends...

"Hmm. Interesting," the Sorting Hat said quietly. "Whealers have always been Hufflepuffs, you know."

*Please*, he thought. *Not Hufflepuff.*

"You don't like it there?" the hat asked. "Maybe I should put you in Ravenclaw then, like your sister. You have the brains, there's no doubt about that."

Honestly, Mike would choose Hufflepuff over his sister any day.

He heard the hat chuckle. "You're a picky one. Oh well, if that's what you want, then I shall put you in —" it shouted the last word to the hall, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Mike let out a sigh of relief. He could not believe his luck. He took the hat off, grinning, and quickly made his way over to the Gryffindor table where his friends were cheering. Dustin and Lucas shook his shoulders when he joined them, and Will gave him a nod from his seat.

Mike plopped down beside Lucas. "Well, I'm glad that's done. The Sorting Hat almost put me in Ravenclaw with Nancy."

"Really?" asked Lucas. "That would have sucked."

"Yeah," he agreed.

"It isn't that bad," said Dustin.

Mike shot him a look. "Maybe for you, it's not."

Suddenly, thunder rolled across the ceiling, making the illusion of the night sky falter for a minute. Mike was so startled that he bumped his knee against the underside of the table. Everyone looked up as lightning lit up the sky and reflected off the high windows. Jane jumped as another bout of lightning was heard, and she hugged herself as she waited for the rain that was sure to follow.

Nothing happened. The enchanted ceiling returned to normal, and everyone turned just in time to see the headmaster lowering his wand. Mike watched in awe as the clouds rearranged themselves and the stars started twinkling again. The first years who still hadn't been sorted had moved closer together during the commotion, so now they were all huddled right below the platform.

"Everyone, calm down," a teacher with a perfectly trimmed moustache said. "It was nothing."

"Professor Hopper," said the headmaster. "If we could please continue."

Professor Hopper looked troubled, though Mike did not know why. He shot a look at the enchanted ceiling as if waiting for it to do something again. Apparently seeing his hesitation, the students clapped, hoping that it would give the remaining First Years and Professor Hopper some encouragement.

Finally, he cleared his throat and read the next name on the scroll: "Jane Hopper!"

Mike raised his head so fast he was surprised that his eyeballs stayed in place. He heard Lucas snigger, but he paid him no mind. The clapping stopped, and everyone set their gaze on El, who didn't seem to realize that she had been called. Indeed, she stood stock-still on her spot at the front of the line, unmoving. Her brown eyes were still staring at the ceiling.

"Why isn't she moving?" whispered Dustin.

"She looks shaken," observed Will.

"Why?" said Mike, concerned. El did look like she was frightened. Her

eyes were wide as they remained glued to the night sky, and he could see her hands clenched tightly at her sides. "Maybe we should go and help her."

"Are you crazy?" said Lucas incredulously. "Did you see anyone else being guided to the stool?"

The students started murmuring. Mike saw Troy and James laughing with their fellow Slytherins as they pointed at Jane's bizarre collection of necklaces, and he felt like putting them both in the Body-Bind curse again. The boys exchanged worried looks as El continued to stare at the ceiling.

"I wonder where they'll put the weirdo," someone said.

"Ssh! That's Professor Hopper's daughter!"

"And that makes a difference, how?"

"Is she deaf?"

"A pity. She's a pretty little thing."

*"Why isn't she moving?"*

Mike gritted his teeth. Professor Hopper licked his lower lip anxiously, perhaps debating whether he should get her or not, but before he could make a move, Mike had already stood up from his seat with a loud screech as he pushed the bench backwards. His fellow Gryffindors gave him curious looks. His friends gaped at him, but he tried his best to ignore them.

"Jesus," Lucas told Dustin and Will. "What the hell is he doing?"

Mike could feel everyone's eyes on him, but he did not care. Mike strode purposefully towards El, his robes whipping about him in his haste, and the whole hall watched as he suddenly grabbed El's arm. She did not look at him; in fact, she did not seem to know that he was even there. Her skin was cold to the touch, and her face looked like it was permanently pointed upwards.

"El," he said. His voice carried over the hall, for everyone had been

shocked into silence. *They must be pretty entertained*, Mike thought dryly. Apparently, they were curious to see how this scene would unfold. "Hey, El."

He patted her cheek gently. He saw Professor Hopper's eyebrow raise. When she did not answer, he lightly poked her side. El started, and she slowly lowered her head to look at him. Her face was pale in the (fake) moonlight, and her lip was trembling.

"Mike?" she asked, confused.

"Hey," he repeated. He smiled at her. "You okay?"

"What are you — ?"

"It's your turn, El," he told her, gesturing at the stool, where the Sorting Hat was waiting.

She blinked. El noticed the whole hall looking at her. "O-oh. I'm sorry, I didn't realize. Sorry."

"It's fine," he assured her. "Are you all right?"

"Y-yes."

"You sure?"

"Promise."

He laughed at that. "Okay. Go on. Me and the others will be right there."

"Yeah. Put on the freakin' hat!" yelled Dustin.

Lucas said sheepishly, "Uh, yeah. Go on, Jane."

She slowly nodded. El clasped her ego pendant with one hand, and Mike gave her one, last encouraging smile before he let her go. This seemed to calm her down; she took a deep breath, then with one tentative smile at him, shakily made her way over to where her father stood. Professor Hopper placed the hat carefully on her hair, and Mike noticed that this time, he made sure that the Sorting Hat

did not swallow a kid's entire head.

El gripped the edges of the stool tightly. The Sorting Hat's eyes closed, and his lips formed into a thin line. Mike could see El whispering, but he had no idea what she was saying. Her hand remained wrapped around her pendant.

"Mike, sit down." Mike heard Nancy say. He blushed and tried to go back to the Gryffindor table as quickly as he could; in his haste, though, he accidentally tripped over the hem of his robes and fell with a resounding crash on one of the benches just as the Sorting Hat declared: "GRYFFINDOR!"

A mixture of clapping and laughter came from the students. Lucas, Dustin, and Will immediately came to Mike's aid, grabbing both his arms and pulling him up. Troy and James's laughter could be heard above the others.

"Nice one, Wheeler!" shouted Troy.

"You do one good thing and see how the world repays you," commented Dustin as he lifted him up by the elbows.

"Are you okay?" asked Will.

Mike studied his wristwatch. "Shit. It's broken."

Lucas shrugged. "Just be glad it's not your jaw."

"I love your optimism, Lucas." Dustin nodded approvingly. He pointed his wand at Mike's broken watch. "I know just the thing — *reparo!*"

The cracks on the glass face of his watch vanished, and the hands started to move again. Mike thanked Dustin, who told him that it was 'no big deal, man.' Lucas rolled his eyes again, and the four of them settled back into their seats. El ambled up to them just as they sat, and they all gave her a smile when she stopped to stand in front of them.

"Welcome to Gryffindor, El," said Will sincerely. "I'm glad you were sorted here."

Dustin waved his hand. "Where did you think they'd put her, Byers? I was *super certain* that she was going to be in Gryffindor — I mean, she's kind of a badass, if you still hadn't noticed."

"She put a curse on Troy. *Once*." Lucas rested his chin on his hand.

"Uh, yeah. And Troy is so easy to fight with. Right, Lucas?" he replied, and his voice was dripping with sarcasm.

As the two of them started bickering, El sat down on the bench next to Mike. She picked up a silver spoon and started twirling it across her fingers, and Mike noticed that she was still clutching her pendant tightly with her other hand. He wanted to ask her about what had happened to her earlier, but he wasn't sure whether she was comfortable enough to talk about it. It wasn't a normal thing, he was sure about that, but he did not want to look like he was prying. Also, even if she did want to talk about it, Mike did not know whether she'd want to talk about it with *him*, if you knew what he meant.

Besides, it wasn't like they were close or anything; they were friends, sure, but at the end of the day, there were still a lot of things about her that he didn't know. He only knew her from two meetings, after all, and Mike was certain that that wasn't a long enough time for there to be any sort of trust built between them. Still, why had she responded to him? She had pulled out of whatever trance she'd been in after he had held her, so surely, that meant something, right? Right.

Mike tried to rationalize things in his mind: of course she'd respond to him... it wasn't like there was anyone else who had tried to help her at that moment... yes, that was it... she just needed a little push, that was all, and Mike was the only person available...

He jumped when he felt someone touch his hand. Mike blinked rapidly, and turned around to see El looking at him with concern. She had let go of her pendant, and now her arm was resting atop the long table. She had put the spoon back into its place.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

"Huh?" he replied stupidly. "Uh, nothing. It's just..." *I am not going to*



*ask her; I am not going to ask her; I am not going to ask her...*

"So," he said slowly, "what was that all about?"

El raised her eyebrows in question.

"I mean, what happened? You seemed scared earlier," he explained, making it sound like he wasn't curious, which he knew he wasn't doing a pretty good job at. "You were all still and pale and well, you look *frightened*. You don't have to tell me or anything —" he quickly amended, " — it's just that we were kind of worried about you, and..."

"Storm."

"What?"

"Storm," said El again.

"Storm?" he repeated. He did not get it. Mike studied El, whose face had crumpled into sadness, and he panicked. He made wild gestures with his hands as he told her, "Shit. Don't cry. I'm sorry, I won't ask you again —"

She shook her head, but no tears came. "I don't like it."

"Storms? You don't like storms?" he clarified.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Bad memories."

"Oh," was all he said. He waited for her to explain, but when she didn't, he continued: "That's okay, El. You don't have to tell me everything."

She looked conflicted, but eventually, she nodded. Lucas nudged Mike's elbow and pointed at the podium, where the headmaster was making his way towards the lectern. Professor Owens was a short man with black hair streaked with gray and a round belly. He wore midnight blue robes lined in silver and small round glasses that was precariously perched on his pudgy nose. He gave off an air of amiability, though Mike knew better than to think that he wasn't capable of very serious magic; he was, after all, the Hogwarts's

headmaster.

"Wow," breathed Dustin. "I was kinda hoping that he would look a little more badass. I was expecting to see some long, silver beard, at least."

"Beards are badass?" asked Will skeptically.

Dustin rubbed his chin in thought. "Actually, I don't know. Hopper's got a moustache, doesn't he? Doesn't he look cool to you?"

"Beards and moustaches are very different things," said Lucas.

"They're both facial hair, dummy."

"I know, asshole. They differ in length, I mean."

*"They differ in length, I mean. Jesus, Lucas."*

"Shut up, both of you," Mike said sharply.

Professor Owens cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. He stepped onto an intricately carved box so that he could reach the top of the lectern, much to the new students' amusement, and when he was sure that the entire hall could see him, spread his arms out as if he was waiting for all of them to give him a hug. Professor Byers clinked her fork against a goblet to tell everyone to be quiet. It took several minutes, but finally, the noises died down.

"Good evening, everyone," began Professor Owens, beaming. "To the first years, welcome to Hogwarts, and to the rest, it is nice to have you back. Now before we proceed to our feast — which I assure you is very, very good," — at this, Dustin grinned — "we must first lay out a few ground rules. No student shall venture into the Forbidden Forest —"

"Unless they wanna die," muttered Professor Hopper.

"— unless otherwise accompanied by a teacher. Registration for each House Quidditch team shall be done in the first week of October, and I will repeat: First Years are not allowed to join." Lucas groaned, and Mike was surprised to hear El sighing. "Lastly, our caretaker, Mr.

Filch, wants me to remind all of you that no student shall be found wandering the castle at night. Students who will get caught will receive detention and lose points for their House."

"Now that that's out of the way, let me introduce you the newest member of our faculty," continued the headmaster. He gestured towards Professor Hopper, who stood up from his seat grudgingly. "Please welcome our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Jim Hopper."

The students clapped, and Hopper inclined his head and said, "Yeah, yeah," before sitting down. Professor Byers gave the headmaster an apologetic smile, and Professor Owens faced the hall once more. He waved his hand. "That is all. Dive in!"

Food suddenly appeared on the tables as if they were summoned from thin air, startling Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Will, and El: large bowls of mashed potato, dozens of chicken legs, steamed corn, liver pie, various tarts, chocolate pudding, and a hundred more meals and dessert popped up in front of them, seemingly endless. Dustin immediately took one of each, his plate being so overcrowded that everything basically meshed together. Lucas looked at it in disgust as he filled his plate with an acceptable amount of food; the food on his was proportioned so equally that Mike wondered if Lucas used a measuring cup or something.

El frowned at her plate. "No eggos?"

Mike can't help laughing. "Sorry, El. No eggos, I guess. But look, there's ice cream!"

She shrugged, defeated. El was just about to reach for a piece of tart when Dustin literally shoved pudding under her nose. The gooey food splashed across her upper lip, making her look like she had a chocolate moustache. Mike glared at his friend.

"Be careful, man," he told him.

Dustin raised his hands. "Sorry, El."

El smiled, and instead of wiping the chocolate away, she spread it

evenly on her lip so that she actually looked like she had facial hair. Dustin guffawed, and a few seconds later, the other boys joined in. Lucas smeared pudding across Mike's cheek, and he retaliated by spreading vanilla ice cream on the tip of his nose.

"Guys," Will said in a condescending tone, but the corners of his mouth betrayed him. "You're wasting it."

"Aww. Come on, Will. Loosen up," said Dustin, putting an arm around him. He drew a smiley face on Will's forehead using whipped cream. El snorted. "There 'ya go."

Will gave him a deadpan stare. The whole group laughed, and by the time they had been escorted to their dormitories, they were too tired to talk. El bid them goodnight at the common room and went up the girl's section of the dormitories, and the boys plopped down their four-poster beds the moment they entered theirs. Mike only had time to admire the scarlet and gold draping on their windows and the Gryffindor banner hanging in their room before he was pulled into a deep sleep.

All in all, Mike thought that his first day at Hogwarts wasn't all that bad. Tomorrow would be the first day of classes, and he felt like it would turn out great. After all, luck seemed to be on his side these past few days.

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He was wrong. Luck was definitely *not* on his side.

Mike walked along the castle corridors with Lucas, Will, and Dustin. They hadn't been able to find El at the Great Hall, so he assumed that she had already gone to their first class — which was, frustratingly, what Mike and his friends were searching for right now. They had been going around the castle for fifteen minutes now, and there was still no sign of their Transfiguration classroom. Mike's side was aching because they had run out of the Great Hall earlier, and now his head was beginning to ache, too, because Dustin and Lucas won't stop bickering. Will walked beside him silently, but it was obvious from the way he was frowning that his patience (which seemed to have no bounds) was wearing thin.

"Shit," said Dustin, panicked. "We're late."

"If you didn't insist on eating *four puddings* at breakfast, then maybe we would have had more time searching the castle for our classroom," replied Lucas, annoyed.

Dustin snorted. "First of all, it was not just pudding — it was chocolate pudding, which made it simply irresistible. Second, this is a big ass castle, so even if we had, like, ten extra minutes, I doubt we'd be able to find our classroom."

"You don't know that," Lucas argued. "Imagine this: that ten minutes you were talking about? We could have spent it actually familiarizing ourselves with the castle's layout, then maybe we wouldn't be having such a hard time right now."

"Familiarizing ourselves with the castle's layout? What's next, Lucas? Want us to draw a blueprint of Hogwarts?"

"Actually, that's not a bad idea! Maybe if you had a fucking blueprint, Mr. I-Am-Totally-Good-At-Directions, we wouldn't be—"

"Guys," intervened Will. "Please, just stay quiet and look...okay? We don't have time for this." He waved his hands to indicate Lucas and Dustin's argument.

The pair glanced at each other, nodded, and resumed their walking — but now, Mike noticed, they were entirely focused on studying the rooms they were passing by instead of trying to shoot down each other's suggestions.

"Mike!" a voice called out behind them. "Dustin! Lucas! Will!"

El ran up to them, waving, and they watched as she pulled to an abrupt stop in front of them. She raised her finger to ask them for a minute as she put her hands to her knees and tried to catch her breath. They gave her time, but really, even Mike was getting a little impatient.

Respiration normal, she straightened up and told them, "Where were you?"

Before any of them could answer, El had already spun on her heels and started to jog in the opposite direction. Baffled, the boys ran after her, their robes whipping around their ankles. Once they had finally caught up, she said, "Professor Clarke was worried when he realized that the class was incomplete, so I volunteered to search for you and —"

"Thanks, El," Lucas interrupted her.

She gave him a small smile. "It's okay. Anyway, he's really nice. He wasn't mad, just concerned. He went out for a bit to check on his schedule, so I guess he still hasn't come back — oh, here we are."

El lead them to a secluded corridor. It was no wonder they hadn't been able to find their classroom; it was located on a hallway that branched off the main floor, almost near the exit to the courtyards. El pushed the door open, and just like she had said, Professor Clarke was out. Thankful that they were spared the humiliation of apologizing in front of the class for being late, the five of them made their way over to the three empty desks in the classroom with their heads bowed.

"Jeez, we're having Transfiguration with the Slytherins?" whispered Mike. He looked around the students wearing their emerald and silver striped ties.

"Yeah," replied Lucas darkly. "Great, huh?"

There were only three available desks left. One was already occupied by the red-haired girl Mike saw during the Sorting, so that meant that one of them had to sit next to her (the desks had two-seater benches). Mike looked at his friends, and he was sure that like him, they were already choosing pairs in their minds. The problem with sitting arrangements such as these was that most of the time, when there was work that needed to be done in pairs, the professor usually paired up seatmates; Mike did not want to be partners with a stranger, especially a Slytherin (he wasn't judging her or anything, but he so far, all the Slytherins he'd met were absolute jerks), and he could see from his the looks on his friends' faces that they were thinking along the same lines as him.

El, still not accustomed to the party's way of thinking — or perhaps she simply did not care, Mike didn't know — immediately settled herself into one of the benches. They glanced at each other suspiciously. Mike bit the inside of his cheek; the chances of him sitting next to the redhead were getting higher and higher by the minute. He discreetly slid his eyes toward Dustin, who was eyeing El thoughtfully.

He rubbed his hands together.

Someone cleared their throat, and the next thing he knew, he and his friends were already moving towards El and the other remaining desk.

"Lucas, let go!"

"Out of the way, Mike!"

"That desk is mine!"

"El, please save that seat for me! I promise to give you more trading cards —"

"Don't bribe her, Dustin —"

"Oww! That's my face, idiot —"

"Oh, you're all here. Good. Thanks for finding them, Jane."

Jane nodded and smiled. They hadn't noticed Professor Clarke entering the classroom while they were fighting. He raised his eyebrows when he saw the tangle boys, but otherwise he let them continue with their struggle. Mike vaguely remembered him from his moustache; he was the teacher who had asked everyone to calm down after the enchanted ceiling had malfunctioned. Dustin, Lucas, and Will took a moment to look at their teacher, confused as to why he wasn't scolding them, and Mike used that chance to squeeze past them. When he placed his book on the desk next to El's, she smiled.

"Hey, no fair!" protested Dustin, when he saw Mike grinning smugly from his spot next to El. "We were distracted."

Lucas sighed. He seemed to have realized that they were basically holding up the entire class, because he suddenly plopped himself on the seat next to the Slytherin girl, who jumped as if she had been pulled out of a stupor. Dustin stared at Lucas, wide-eyed, and the latter gave an annoyed huff. Dustin saluted him and pulled Will to their desk.

Professor Clarke clapped once. "All right. So, good morning everyone. I know the headmaster had already said this, but nonetheless, I want to repeat it: welcome to Hogwarts. I am Professor Clarke, Head of Ravenclaw House and your Transfiguration teacher. I've been teaching in Hogwarts for almost fifteen years now, and believe me when I say that this is the best wizarding school you'll ever find." He smiled at them, his eyes crinkling. "I hope you enjoy your stay here."

And they did. Well, their stay in Professor Clarke's class, that is. Dustin was completely captivated with the subject, and even El, who shyly told Mike that Transfiguration wasn't her strong suit, diligently wrote notes on her notebook. Mike thought that this was due in part to the fact that Professor Clarke discussed the lesson with a smile, and that he explained complicated concepts with ease (it certainly helped that he kept on referencing nerdy stuff that Mike and his friends were privy to). The whole party agreed that Professor Clarke was a great man, and that they would certainly pay attention to his classes.

After Transfiguration was Herbology, where the gang spent the rest of the morning familiarizing themselves with the greenhouses and Professor Wood, who was so tall that Mike's nape ached after looking up at him too much. Dustin, predictably, loved the subject; he had asked Professor Wood to check out his Trapper, which he seemed unenthusiastic about, but nevertheless, he agreed to it. Next was charms, which was taught by a rather young witch named Professor Sweeney. She taught them the levitating charm ("Remember, *wingardium leviosa*. Make the 'o' nice and clear."), and by the end of their class, Will had successfully made his feather float, much to their teacher's delight.

"Man, I'm hungry," complained Dustin. They had just been released by Professor Sweeney. "What's next on our schedule?"



Will checked his timetable. "Potions with Hufflepuff."

After a quick lunch, the party proceeded down the dungeons, where they were met by green torches and cold air. The dungeons felt unwelcoming, and Mike found himself wishing that he had brought a thicker cloak. The walls on either side of them were moist, and some algae seeped through the cracks in the stone. They shivered slightly as they wound their way through the twisting stairs, until finally, they entered the classroom, and Mike's first thought was, *this place is creepy*.

There were six curved tables arranged in a semi-circle around the room with several high stools before them, small metal racks for holding vials, and a lectern for the professor at the front. Tall glass cabinets were pushed against the stone walls, and they contained large jars filled with green liquid and various specimens that Mike did not know. There was little to no light in the dungeon, and the chill coming from outside had seeped its way inside the classroom.

"The Slytherin common room is near here, right?" asked Lucas.

Mike nodded as he hugged himself for warmth. "Yeah. And I'm not surprised. This place looks evil."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "I think evil's stretching it too far."

It was Mike's turn to look skeptic. "Since when did you start siding with Slytherin?"

"I am not siding with them," he retorted. He shrugged and took out *Magical Draughts and Potions*. "I'm just sayin'. Just because Troy and James are in Slytherin doesn't mean the whole lot of them are jerks, too."

"You literally just told me how much they suck back in Transfiguration," Mike reminded him.

Before Lucas could reply, the dungeon doors opened, and a mass exodus of yellow clad students — Hufflepuffs — piled in, followed by a woman whom Mike assumed was their teacher.

"What the hell?" breathed Dustin.

"Oh," said Will, blinking. He followed Dustin's line of sight. "That's Professor Frazier."

"Professor Frazier?"

"Yes. She'd been here since I could remember. She's head of Slytherin House."

Professor Frazier was a middle-aged witch with shoulder-length blonde hair that was combed stylishly so that it looked like it naturally curled around her face. She had clear blue eyes and high cheekbones, and her lips looked like it was pulled back into a permanent smile; her mouth was stretched widely, and if Mike hadn't known better, he'd say that she was baring her teeth on them. She wore a bright, pink robe over a matching lavender coat and skirt and a small hat with pale pink roses. Mike's eyes were starting to hurt from looking at her for too long — *was someone supposed to be this bright?*

She couldn't have been more out of place in the dark, cold dungeon that was her classroom. Surrounded by disgusting specimens and boiling potions, Professor Frazier shone like a giant candy.

"Hello, dears," she said in a sweet tone. "I am professor Frazier, and I will be teaching you all about potions." She laughed as if this was the funniest thing in the world. "Here I will teach you how to make people fall in love with a whiff, or how to make them spill all their darkest secrets with a small drop of liquid, or how to make them bleed with just a teensy bit of something spilled into their drinks."

She smiled wider, if that was possible, and there was something about her smile that made Mike felt uneasy. Professor Frazier was nice so far, and yet Mike found her cheerful attitude quite unsettling. Perhaps it was the way she was explaining all these nasty things potions could do with such a jovial tone, or maybe it was her unusual bright clothing, but Mike found himself unable to meet her gaze. He stole a glance in Lucas's direction and saw him frowning at Professor Frazier, and he knew then that he wasn't the only one feeling that way.

"All right," she said, her eyes twinkling. She picked up a round bottle

with a long nose and sprayed its contents on her body. The dungeon was suddenly filled with the smell of roses. Mike liked it immediately. "Honey, could you please read the first paragraph in page five?"

She nodded at El, who stood up and slowly read the section assigned to her. As El's voice filled the room, Mike watched Professor Frazier, who seemed to be gazing at her with more than mild interest. The professor clasped her hands before her and bobbed her head with each sentence El read, but Mike can't help but notice how her eyes roamed around El's face as if memorizing it.

Professor Frazier saw Mike staring at her, and she smiled. She picked up her perfume, and the smell of roses became stronger —

Mike felt all warm and fuzzy, and he marveled at how soft El's voice was; he had always thought that she sounded wonderful, like the comforting sound of chirping birds in the early morning...

He blinked. What was he thinking about again? Oh yeah, about Professor Frazier. He narrowed his eyes at her, and he saw that she had finally turned away from El and was now writing in the blackboard in neat, cursive handwriting.

"Thank you, dear," said Professor Frazier once El was finished. "Five points to Gryffindor."

Professor Frazier started to babble on and on about something called a bezoar, but instead of taking notes, he drowned her voice and studied her things, which she had left on top of the teacher's table. There was a roll of parchment, a pink quill and bottle, a copy of *Magical Draughts and Potions*, and her perfume. Mike didn't know what he was looking for — a vial of poison? Large soup ladles? The irony of the situation was not lost on him; he was expecting Professor Frazier, a true witch, to possess objects which typical witches portrayed in Muggle movies had.

Mike did not know why the hell he wanted her to look like those witches; maybe because he wanted her to be as nasty as them, which, so far, was not the case. Still... why did he have a feeling that she would bring nothing but disaster?

"Mike," said El quietly beside him. She had stopped writing. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he answered, and it was partly true.

She shook her head slightly. "Aren't you going to write anything down?"

"Huh? Ooh! Right." He opened his notebook and picked up his quill. "El, I, uh..."

"What?"

"I missed the first part of the lecture."

She sighed. "Here, you can copy mine."

"Thanks." Mike felt embarrassed. She simply slid her notebook closer to him, and continued to write down everything that Professor Frazier was saying.

Mike tried to clear his mind and concentrate on copying El's notes, but occasionally, he would look up and see professor Frazier staring at them — or rather, El. He did not like the way she gave him a nod every time their eyes met, and he absolutely hated that perfume of hers, with its addicting scent and —

The classroom was once again filled with the smell of roses, and Mike breathed in the air almost hungrily. He gazed at El, who was smiling down at her notebook, and his friends, who were all listening to Professor Frazier with similar content looks on their faces. He had a strange urge to hug them, or in El's case, kiss her (he did not even know why he thought of that). He was just so glad to have them. They were the best...

"Ma'am?" a girl from Hufflepuff raised her hand.

"Yes? What is it, honey?"

"You got number twenty-two, wrong, ma'am. It says in the book that —"

"Oh my. Yes, yes. My mistake. Thank you for pointing it out."

As Professor Frazier hastily corrected her mistake, someone snorted. It wasn't loud or anything, and it could have been passed off for a sneeze, but the professor's head snapped backwards so fast that Mike was pretty sure it got unhinged. She zeroed in on the girl who had snorted, and her blue eyes twitched.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, ma'am," said a girl whom he recognized as Jennifer.

Professor Frazier's smile never faltered, but now it morphed into what looked like a grimace. "Hmph. Talking nonsense in the middle of class, I see. Do you think it was funny that a student corrected me?"

Jennifer was mortified. "N-no! That wasn't what Mia and I were laughing about —"

"*So you were laughing,*" she confirmed. "Gossiping during lessons now, are we?. Hmph. Now, I can't have that, can I? You must be thought about respect."

There was a sudden scream, and everyone turned to look as the word 'RESPECT' was branded into Jennifer's forehead in blood. All the students looked at Professor Frazier, horrified, as Jennifer clutched at her face and sobbed.

It was only a few minutes later that Mike realized that the letters had been carved into her skin.

"What the flyin' fuck —" said Dustin, apparently realizing this too, when suddenly, he stopped. His eyes glazed over, and he quietly picked up his quill and started to write as if nothing happened.

Alarm bells started ringing in Mike's head. "What's happening? Dustin, why —"

"That ought to do the trick," said Professor Frazier happily, deaf to Jennifer's anguished cries. "Now, now, dear. Calm down. That was just a little punishment to remind you not to disrespect your teacher."

The word vanished from Jennifer's forehead, and her skin patched itself up and smoothed. Professor Frazier put on more perfume; the scent of roses filled Mike's senses again, and he smiled as he went back to writing just like everyone else. He wondered why Jennifer was crying. The Hufflepuff didn't seem to have any idea either, as she wiped her tears away and shrugged. Mike let it go — he wasn't close to her or anything, so he needn't have dwelled on her actions too much.

When the bell rang to release them, they all practically skipped out the dungeon, all smiles and laughter. They decided to spend some time in the courtyard, where they found a long, marble bench to sit on. It was under the shade of a willow tree, so the sun did not beat down their faces and the gentle breeze ruffled their hair.

"Potions was awesome," said Dustin, beaming.

Lucas bobbed his head. "I know. It's the best class we've had so far."

Will's eyes were closed, but he opened them when he said, "Yeah. Professor Frazier was very nice."

They all nodded in agreement, and Mike felt himself smiling widely. He was feeling lightheaded today, and he can't help but to admire the way the sunlight shot through the canopy and created shiny spots on the grass, or how the rustling of the leaves sounded so comforting to his ear. He watched as El slowly twirled, humming to herself, and her brown locks bounced on her shoulders. She twirled and twirled and twirled, and Mike did not know whether it was the dancing or the girl that was making him dizzy.

She beamed at him, and he decided. It was definitely the girl. He could smell roses nearby, and he wanted to search for them, so he could give her one. He was so comfortable in his spot on the bench though, surrounded by his friends, that he remained where he was. Jennifer Hayes walked past them, smiling and waving, and Will returned her greeting almost absentmindedly.

El had given up trying to twirl for twenty consecutive times, and she settled herself beside him. Mike wondered where the roses were again. He really wanted to give her one. They stayed at the courtyard

for about half an hour, and when they saw the giant clock strike five, they stood up and made their way to the Great Hall.

Mike felt weird as they ate dinner. He felt like he was forgetting something, but what it was, he did not know. He stared at his plate, lost in thought, and he accidentally nicked his finger on the edge of the knife he was using to cut his meatloaf.

"Oww," he said, as blood oozed out the small cut. Instead of wiping it away, he stared at the crimson liquid, feeling an immense sense of déjà vu. He had a nagging feeling that he had just seen a similar cut before, but it looked entirely different from this one; it was more precise, more brutal...

El looked at the wound on his finger with alarm, and she quickly wrapped a handkerchief around it to stop the bleeding. Mike looked up at her, startled, and she tilted her head in response before going back to her meal.

Mike studied his wound. The blood seeped through the cloth, and somehow, he imagined that it looked kinda like a red rose.